INTERRACIAL INTIMACY: HOW MIXED COUPLES NEGOTIATE AND NARRATE THEIR IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The rising number of interracial couples in Canada has often been interpreted as a success of multicultural inclusion. This dissertation questions this assumption by examining the experiences of interracial couples and how they identify themselves and their relationships. Through 87 in-depth interviews with 29 interracial couples in Vancouver, I investigated how couples narrate their stories of intimacy in relation to larger national narratives of Canada as a multicultural nation. My research led to four key findings. First, most of the couples in my study were affectively invested in dominant discourses of multiculturalism. While many viewed it as reflecting their values and aspirations, others were critical of how this national narrative muted certain aspects of their identity and experiences while deflecting attention from racism in Canadian society. For example, couples with Black partners faced greater hostility due to their interracial status and were more critical of racial inequalities in Canada. This can be understood in the context of anti-Black racism in Vancouver and Canada. People of colour said that their white partners had a legitimation effect on them and made them more acceptable in social spaces dominated by whiteness. Second, Québécois and Anglo-Canadian couples in my study expressed a desire to be considered ‘mixed’ in the Canadian context, given the historical relations of colonialism, power and domination between the two groups. Their reflections offer new possibilities for understanding whiteness in Canada. Third, for some of the couples I interviewed, interracial relationships offered opportunities for white partners to cultivate racial literacy by learning from their partners' experiences of racialization and empathetic identification. However, most male white partners in my study refused to recognize their own racial privilege and diminished their partners’ experiences of racialization. Cultivation of racial literacy required people of colour to perform the emotional labour of sharing their experiences of racialization.
with their partner. Finally, LGBTQ interracial couples experienced the double burden of defying the norms of monoraciality and heteronormativity and felt a need to ‘legitimize’ their relationships through symbolic means. Interracial relationships can be sites of power and contestation, but they cannot resolve the problem of racism in Canada.
Lay Summary

The rising number of interracial couples in Canada has been celebrated as a success of multiculturalism. In this study I question this belief by studying the lived experiences of 29 interracial couples in Vancouver. Through 87 interviews, I examined how couples identified as ‘mixed.’ Several couples identified with multicultural ideals of Canadian society but criticized the policy’s focus on culture rather than racism in Canada. Interracial relationships gave white partners an opportunity to learn about racism from their partners’ experiences. However, several white male partners refused to believe their partners’ claims of racism or minimised their experiences. LGBTQ couples in my study reported facing more opposition for being LGBTQ than for being in an interracial relationship. Couples with a Black partner faced greater hostility due to the small number of Blacks in Vancouver and the prevalence of racism against Black people. Greater numbers of interracial couples do not indicate reduced racism.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Tanvi Sirari. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 3–6 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H16-02377.
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Chapter 1: Introduction: Interracial Intimacy in a Multicultural Metropole

In 2011, 4.6% of Canadians reported being in mixed relationships, 3.9% of mixed relationships include a white partner, while 0.7% of mixed relationships have partners from two different visible minority groups (Statistics Canada, 2014). Although this is a small proportion of the Canadian population, there has been a steady increase in the number of mixed couples – up from in 3.2% in 2001 (Milan et al., 2010; Statistics Canada, 2014). Statistics Canada have not yet released the new figures on mixed unions from the 2016 census, however, Aathavan (2021) has analysed the raw data from the 2016 long form census. She reports that 7.3% of all unions in Canada are mixed; 6.7% of these relationships include a white and visible minority group partner, and 0.6% include partners from different visible minority groups (Aathavan, 2021). Based on data from Statistics Canada, persons in mixed unions tend to be younger, live in large urban areas, have a higher education, and live in common-law partnerships (Aathavan, 2021; Milan & Hamm, 2004; Milan et al., 2010).

Statistics Canada (2017) reported a stable rise in persons who identify as visible minority across different racial groups in Canada. The proportion of Canadians who identify as visible minorities increased from 13.4% in 2001 to 16.2% in 2006 and was approximately 22% in 2016. This means a greater number of Canadians of different racial and ethnic backgrounds have opportunities to build relationships. The rising numbers of mixed couples can be interpreted as the outcome of growing diversity among the Canadian population, reduction of social sanctions against mixed-race unions, more opportunities for intermixing in growing urban centres, relatively increasing homogamy between groups in terms of education and employment and greater appreciation for cultural differences. My focus in this research is less on why the
numbers have increased and more on the everyday experiences of mixed couples and their sense of identity in a multicultural Canadian context.

The increase in the numbers of mixed couples has been celebrated in Canada as a sign of the success of Canadian multiculturalism and its project for integration of different ethnic groups in the country (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Kitossa & Deliovsky, 2010; Mahtani, 2014). This juxtaposition of rising numbers of mixed couples and claims that multiculturalism has been a success in Canada constructs a particular narrative of nationhood that includes mixed couples as symbols of a multicultural present and future. It is in this broader context that I locate my study of interracial intimacy between mixed couples in Vancouver. The metropolitan city of Vancouver has one of the highest populations of visible minorities in Canada, and the largest percentage of mixed couples in Canada. In 2011, 9.6% of couples in Vancouver reported being in mixed unions (Statistics Canada, 2014).

The focus of my research is interracial couples. The official term for couples with partners from different racial backgrounds is mixed unions (Statistics Canada, 2014). While race is not used as an official statistical category in Canada, the Employment Equity Act defines visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada, 2014). The term visible minority is used to classify racial minorities in Canada, but their classification also takes into account their cultural heritage and ethnic ancestry. The category visible minority is further divided into “Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Arab, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, Visible

1 The term Caucasian is a pseudo-scientific category that was used historically to create a social identity that could strategically include and exclude people to support certain relations of domination and subordination (Baum, 2006). Despite critiques of this term, the Canadian census continues to use Caucasian as a reference for white. According to Baum (2006), the use of the Caucasian race category to refer to European people shows “how social and political forces have shaped scientific knowledge of race. Race in short is an effect of power” (p. 7–8).
minority, n.i.e. [not included elsewhere], and Multiple visible minority” (Statistics Canada, 2014). Even though race has been a significant part of public discourse in terms of histories of British and French colonization and resettlement, under the official policy, difference within the Canadian population is addressed in terms of culture and not race (Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007). I address the theme of “mixedness” in greater detail in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

My study does not include any participants of Indigenous ancestry. This was not a deliberate exclusion, but certain aspects of the study may have contributed to this. The official definition of mixed unions in Canada does not include couples with Indigenous partners, and it only includes unions between people defined as visible minorities and whites. The category visible minority does not include Indigenous peoples (Statistics Canada, 2014). Mahtani (2014) has rightly criticized this narrow definition for ignoring the histories of intermixing that highlight the settler colonial nature of the Canadian state. Until recently, Métis have been denied Indigenous status in Canada. As Mahtani (2014) points out, academic scholarship on intermixing and mixed-race studies ignores “aboriginal forms of mixed-race experience, particularly the regulation of Métis people” (p. 48). The literature in the field focuses primarily on white and non-white partners belonging to racialized immigrant groups (Mahtani, 2014).

I framed my own recruitment call in terms of interracial and mixed couples which may have affected who responded to my invitation to participate. I did include couples in my study who did not conform to the official definition of mixed unions in Canada. Some couples who approached me did not conform to this definition. For example, Jacque and Ann, a Quebecois and Anglo heterosexual couple expressed interest in being part of my study, although they are both white. I included them in my study to explore the complexity of defining intermixture in a country that includes English and French as the founding colonial nations.
It is important to note that I did not receive any response from couples with Indigenous partners. I did not make additional efforts to recruit couples with Indigenous partners either. There are a few reasons for that. The literature that I used to frame my study has limited focus on mixed couples with Indigenous partners, and my study was influenced by such a framing. The majority of the empirical studies on interracial couples that I build upon in this study are situated in the US, and they do not include Indigenous participants either. The constraints of time also made it harder for me to diversify my process of recruitment to include Indigenous participants. I believe that future research on mixed couples must include mixed couples with Indigenous partners and actively address the context of settler colonialism prevalent in Canada and the US.

On the face of it, the Canadian context of racial relations appears to be quite different from the U.S. context. Scholars, including Thobani (2007) and Mackey (2002), have postulated that the policy of multiculturalism has presented Canada as different from the United States and as innocent of the imperial and racist tendencies of the former. Thobani (2007) opines that Canadian multiculturalism “opened up the possibility of recasting national identity in a manner that maintained its uniqueness; it could now be cast as being distinct from the United States and Europe, and thus not (directly) implicated in their (more visible) colonial and imperialist histories” (p. 156). Studying the experiences of interracial couples in a multicultural metropole like Vancouver, known for its long history of immigration and a pluralist cultural economy (Murray & Hutton, 2012) offers one possibility to assess whether and to what extent Canada differs from the U.S. context, and what experiences of interracial intimacy look like in a metropolitan Canadian city. A study of interracial intimacy offers an important lens through which to scrutinize the workings of race and racism in everyday life. This study opens the
possibility to examine how public and political commitments to multiculturalism and inclusivity shape the everyday experiences of interracial couples.

1.1 Research Questions

This dissertation examines the multiple ways in which racial power finds expression in the intimate domain of romantic partnerships. Some of the questions it considers are: How does race structure identities and interactions in intimate settings? What are the meanings attached to race in intimate settings? How does race shape romantic desire? Focussing on people’s everyday experience and agency as they struggle for self-definition and negotiate their racial differences in intimate settings, and in contexts which are often racially charged, can potentially help to answer such questions. Although people’s agency is not formed in a vacuum, but is a product of the same structures, which simultaneously constrain them, people negotiate social structures in creative ways and express their agency (Sewell, 1992). Social identities “are sources of meaning and affiliation, but they are also bound up with social relations of power and domination” (Baum, 2006, p. 234). It is imperative that an investigation of interracial intimacy study the lived experience of couples in the context of the power relations arising from the racial structure of Canadian society, while also paying attention to how people navigate those structural constraints. Asking and answering questions emerging from such a standpoint can generate insights into how race shapes people’s everyday lives. This study has the potential to show how racial power manifests itself in intimate and interpersonal relations and how it is reproduced and contested in the everyday life of mixed couples.

This study is guided by four research questions, which are addressed in Chapters 3 through 6. I start by asking: How do mixed couples make sense of their mixedness? In answering this question, I focus on how couples identify themselves as mixed and how they talk about
themselves as mixed couples. I explore how these couples think others perceive them as mixed and how they then negotiate these perceptions.

The Second question is: *How does interracial intimacy affect the development of racial literacy?* I use Twine’s (2010) concept of *racial literacy* to study how the affect produced in an interracial relationship influences the development of racial awareness and understandings of racism particularly for white partners. I also examine how partners of colour describe their role in this process.

Third, I pose the question: *How do race, gender, and sexuality work together to shape the experiences of mixed couples?* I focus on how couples experience and navigate their racial, sexual, and gender identities in their everyday lives. I am attentive to how these social identities structure their lived experience as a mixed couple. Here I focus on the experiences of LGBTQ mixed couples who have received less attention in the literature on interracial intimacy. I examine how these couples’ everyday experiences are shaped by what Steinbugler (2012) calls their transgressing the norms of interraciality and monoraciality.

The final research question is: *How do mixed couples’ narratives of their personal experiences relate to the larger narrative about the multicultural Canadian nation?* Here I focus on how mixed couples place their personal experiences in relation to the broader context of the multicultural Canadian nation. I focus on how these couples talk about the significance of Canadian multiculturalism, prevailing forms of racism in Canadian society, and how they relate this to their own experience. This is a particularly important question, as the idea of the Canadian multicultural nation is central to the racial formation in Canada (Fleras, 2014; Thobani, 2007).

In the next section, I present a short discussion of the existing literature on interracial couples and situate my study within these larger conversations in the field that highlight the
challenges, possibilities, and significance of studying these couples. I have organised my review of the literature in relation to the research questions that I pose above. Next, I reflect on my own role as a researcher and focus on my own place and positionality. Subsequently I discuss the choices I made while representing race in this research. In the final section I explain how this dissertation is organised.

1.2 The Field of Interracial Intimacy

Previous research on mixed couples has grappled with the problems of defining what it means to be a racially mixed couple, especially when there is so much variation between official classifications, geographical contexts, and social conceptions of difference and boundaries (Rodríguez-García, 2015; Telles & Sue, 2009; Törngren et al., 2016). Miri Song (2009, p. 338) calls the task of demarcating mixed relationships as “inherently messy business.” Literature on interracial couples can be situated in the context of research on intermarriage, which considers such partnerships to be significant because they are a sign of assimilation (Alba & Nee, 2003; Waters & Jiménez, 2015) and integration (Rodríguez-García et al., 2015) in multi-ethnic and multi-racial Western societies. Quantitative studies have examined the characteristics of individuals who intermarry, and what motivates their choices (Feng & Myles, 2013; Gullickson, 2006; Rosenfeld, 2005). These studies have largely focused on describing tendencies of mixed couples, and how different demographic factors like age, education, employment may influence their choices. Qualitative research has focused on the experiences of interracial couples, especially how they negotiate the challenges and opposition that they continue to experience (Childs, 2005, 2009; Nemoto, 2009; Steinbugler, 2012).

Scholars have studied how mixed-race relationships may contribute to the development of greater awareness and understanding around race and racism. Studies in the area have
investigated the possibilities of development of racial literacy and anti-racial consciousness through interracial intimacy and its limitations (Frankenberg, 1993; Twine, 2010; Yancy, 2007). This is a central theme in this study, and I examine how racial power expresses itself in the interpersonal relations between partners who are white and people of colour. Recent studies from the Canadian context have focused on how dating someone from a different racial and ethnic background may be motivated by an interest in cultural difference in the multicultural Canadian context (Yodanis & Lauer, 2017; Yodanis et al., 2012). Canadian scholars have also focused on how cultural difference is promoted, maintained, and transmitted to children by interracial parents (Meintel & Le Gall, 2015; Meintel, 2002). Scholars have critically engaged with the discourse of celebration of interracial intimacy and multiracialism as progressive and anti-racial (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Mahtani, 2014; Sexton, 2008). The literature from the United States has often dominated the discussion of interracial intimacy, while very few studies in this area have emerged from the Canadian context (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017). Interracial intimacy in the Canadian context remains an under researched subject, and this study seeks to address this gap in existing scholarship.

Quantitative research on interracial marriage in the United States has often explained the social phenomena in terms of status exchange and homogamy, especially in the context of white and Black marriage. “According to status exchange theory,” Gullickson (2006) summarizes, “high-status Blacks will exchange their status for the racial status of a white spouse, while a white spouse will exchange their racial status for the high economic status of a Black spouse” (p. 293). However, other studies have rejected this theory in favour of status and educational homogamy as a major determinant of both intra/interrmarriage (Feng & Myles, 2013; Rosenfeld, 2005). Comparing intermarriage in Canada and the United States, Hou and Myles
(2013) assert that there is no support for status exchange theory based on the data on Black and white intermarriages in Canada. Instead, they stress educational homogamy as a predictor for these marriages. Rosenfeld (2005) argues that intermarriage is usually homogenous when it comes to status based on education and occupation, arguing that in choosing a spouse, people follow a principle of maximization of utility and select partners who are more educated. Educationally homogenous couples share cultural interests and propinquity due to their interaction in educational institutions, increasing their chances of marriage (Rosenfeld, 2005).

However, these studies do not interrogate the influence of race on education and employment, which is often the basis of homogamy in marriage. Racial inequality between whites and Blacks and other racial groups affects education and employment credentials of individuals that belong to these groups, making Blacks less likely to have similar education levels to whites, for example.

Bratter and Zuberi (2008) assert that studies based on quantitative analysis of large-scale statistical data tend to focus on broader patterns of educational homogamy and assume that there is no connection between ascribed (race) and achieved (education) status, and the meaning of one does not have a bearing on the other. They claim that an increase in racial diversity does not mean an increase in racial contact or intermarriage. Qualitative investigations of interracial marriages have complicated the assertions made by the status exchange and homogamy theories by drawing attention towards social forces that structure individual choices. Individuals do not always act on the rational principle of maximizing utility to follow the norms of propinquity and homogamy when it comes to developing interracial intimacies, as homogamy theories suggest.

Educational homogamy may not always positively affect interracial romantic partnerships. For example, McClintock (2010) studied patterns of interracial dating among
students in an elite university and conducted in depth interviews to find that racially segregated social networks affect the racial composition of students’ relationships. Physical proximity did not lead to social proximity. Thus, educational homogamy did not positively affect race-based romantic preferences, even though students were far from home and away from parental interference. These findings also contradict the promise of racial and cultural “conviviality” (Gilroy, 2005), the idea that expected multiculturalism would promote cohabitation and everyday interaction between young people belonging to different racial groups in diverse and comfortable spaces promoting formation of affective ties between them.

In a multicultural context, individuals are often attracted to differences instead of similarities between them. The research by Yodanis and colleagues (2012) demonstrates that romantic relationships are not always motivated by homogamous similarities. Acquiring an affiliative association with their partner’s culture motivated individuals to invest considerable time and effort in learning about and identifying with their partner’s culture. These individuals wanted to retain their differences, and their new affiliative identities were additive rather than assimilative.

The studies mentioned above looked at the broader patterns and tendencies that directed the formation of interracial partnerships. Childs (2005) argues that studies on interracial couples need to move beyond the motivations and characteristics of individuals who are part of such relationships and focus on the social worlds of these couples and on how society constructs them. Childs (2005) reported that a majority of white community members believed that there are few interracial partnerships because people are more comfortable with someone of the same race and that this reflects individual choices and preferences. Such narratives do not see the important links between individual preference and the social context. Respondents often expressed
“supportive opposition” (Childs, 2005, p. 123) on the subject of interracial intimacy: they opposed such unions but couched their opposition in non-racial terms. For example, some alluded to the difficulties and racial prejudices that children born out of such relationships would face, placing the responsibility of racism on the parents (the interracial couple) rather than society. My study draws on this research and investigates whether and how social opposition towards interracial intimacy plays out in the Canadian context, which is seen as relatively more inclusive of differences.

Other studies have also confirmed social opposition faced by mixed couples (Frankenberg, 1993; Steinbugler, 2012; Twine, 2010). Frankenberg (1993) discusses the relationship dynamics faced by interracial couples due to the racial structure of society. She explains: “One was the struggle to relate as intimates and equals in a society that refuses either possibility. In a second dynamic, problems in the relationship were played out in racial terms. A third scenario was the (impossible) desire to resolve or transcend individuals’ differential positioning as persons of colour or white, in the context of intimate relationships” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 113). Although much has changed since Frankenberg’s astute observation in terms of growing numbers of interracial couples and strengthening of public norms against overt forms of racial discrimination, race and racism continue to be salient in structuring social relations, including intimate ones. However, racism, some argue, has taken different and more subtle forms. For instance, Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes colour-blind racism as the prevailing form of racism that rearticulates elements of traditional liberalism in the interest of illiberal goals.

My dissertation research examines the experiences of mixed couples and places them within a larger national framework. Rather than explore these relations in terms of individual dynamics, I consider them within the context of the ‘multicultural’ Canadian nation to evaluate
how these national scripts and narratives inform and even shape actual lived experiences. A study of interracial intimacy offers an important lens through which to scrutinize the workings of race and racism in everyday life. Vancouver, which can be described as a multicultural metropole, offers an ideal place to study how race and racism operate in the intimate sphere by examining the lived experience of interracial couples.

Race is a socially constructed entity, but one that has real consequences on people’s lives. One place where this is clear, is in mixed unions. Romantic desire is often seen as an individual choice and self-expression, especially in the emerging neoliberal context where individual autonomy is valorized and the role of social structures in shaping it is minimized. Although romantic desire is perceived as a deeply private aspect of human experience and ultimately an expression of freedom of choice, same-race marriages and partnerships are often perceived to be more appropriate and “natural” than interracial marriages and partnerships, which have historically been categorized as exceptional, deviant, or progressive, circumscribing romantic desire with normative expectations of racial homogamy. This contradiction reflects the paradoxical character of liberal individualism, where individual choice is privileged. Although it is circumscribed by racial structures and norms, these larger social structures and constraints on individual choice are often ignored and disregarded. In the present context, neoliberal ideology privileges a conception of the atomistic individual without bonds of solidarity, relying on private interests to make cost-effective, rational decisions. This ideology supports the portrayal of intimacy as a domain where personal autonomy and emotional connections can flourish without any interference from social structures (Robinson, 2015; Terry & Braun, 2012).

The connection between race, intimacy, and desire questions the idea of the autonomous individual subject. Collins (2005) has argued that romantic love may present a fantasy of escape
from social obligations, but individual perceptions of what is possible and desirable are shaped by the wider social context. Similarly, Robinson (2015) has argued that the discourse of personal preference framing romantic connections must be understood from the perspective of new racism, which conceals the existence of structural inequalities by focusing on individual choice and responsibility. Romantic choices based on sexual attraction can be racially structured without conscious intention or consideration.

Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of habitus, for example, describes how unconscious structures of thought and perception structure people’s choices based on their social class. Steinbugler (2012) elaborates Bourdieu’s arguments and talks about “racial habitus” as a set of socially situated dispositions, which may shape people’s orientations structuring their romantic choices. The process of selecting a partner could also be studied in terms of taste, one related to cultural and social distinctions such as race and class. Critical awareness of the potential for the interracial intimacy to destabilize and reproduce existing racial hierarchies is essential for understanding how it is negotiated in everyday practice and lived experience.

A sociological study of interracial intimacy can potentially demonstrate how our intimate lives are deeply shaped by social structures. This dissertation examines how race structures intimate and affective spheres of life through in-depth interviews. It also offers theoretical possibilities for illuminating the process of the formation of socially situated subjectivity of individuals and of couples involved in these relationships. As scholars remind us, human emotions are structured by the social context that their bearers inhabit and are adjusted accordingly (Hochschild, 2012). For Holland (2012), erotic desire itself is shaped by racial feelings. Although historical constraints on romantic desire across racial lines construct interracial desire as a transgression, Holland (2012) argues that even these “transgressions” are
influenced by “racial feeling” that taint the intimacy, spontaneity, and innocence associated with erotic desire.

Romantic or sexual desire involves the element of attraction, which determines who and what is perceived to be desirable. Desirability of an individual as a romantic partner is judged based on qualities they possess. The dominant ideas of aesthetics and beauty are historically formed on racial logics (Goldberg, 1993). These ideas of beauty are racially coded and associated with intellectual and moral qualities. Beauty standards have privileged whiteness and in so doing have reinforced racial hierarchy. Racially constituted aesthetic ideals structure romantic choices even when race may not have been consciously acknowledged or considered. Chow (2000), in her study on choices of romantic partners among Asian Americans, has shown how these ideas inform the practices of individuals. Romantic or sexual desire can often be affected by racial thinking, and prevailing racist stereotypes and discourses can impact how it unfolds.

Unlike the U.S. context, interracial intimacy has not been studied extensively in Canada (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Hamplova & Le Bourdais, 2010). A majority of qualitative studies on interracial couples are situated in the United States and focus on Black and white couples. As such, the findings from this study can generate comparative insights on how the experiences of interracial intimacy in North America are informed by larger national narratives. The historical contexts of slavery and settler colonialism shared by United States and Canada (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018) render this comparison meaningful. By studying the experiences of interracial couples in Canada, focussing on the personal trajectories of these relationships, and situating them in the context of settler colonialism and multiculturalism, my dissertation research will illuminate how race and racism works through intimate partnerships in the Canadian context.
These insights can illuminate the significance and the working of race and racism in the organisation of social hierarchies and power in the contemporary Canadian society.

The field of interracial intimacy is centred on studies of couples where at least one partner is white (Mahtani, 2014; Song, 2015). Although my participants include several couples where one partner identified as white and another belonged to a visible minority, I have also included couples where both partners are considered to be visible minorities, as well as couples with partners who belong to multiracial backgrounds. The experience of these couples is underrepresented in existing academic research (Mahtani, 2014). Their accounts highlight the messiness of racial boundaries and interrogate the very idea of mixedness, which assumes racial purity and neat racial boundaries that are blurred through desire.

Although settler colonialism is pervasive in the United States, the experiences of slavery have shaped the dominant narrative about race and racism. The racial miscegenation laws prohibiting interracial intimacy were rooted in racial hierarchies defined by the system of slavery (Kennedy, 2004). The Canadian context is different. Although miscegenation laws like those in the United States did not exist in Canada, the settler colonial Canadian state also tried to police racial proximities between Indigenous peoples, Euro-Canadians, and people of colour (Mawani, 2009). For example, Thompson (2009) analyzed the parallels between American laws against miscegenation and the Canadian Indian Act to investigate how they regulated the intimate sphere through legal procedures. The Indian Act governed every aspect of Indigenous peoples’ lives, including their intimate relationships. Under the Act, Native women who married non-Native men were forced to enfranchise and lost their rights to Indian identity, community, and land. The children of these mixed unions did not have legal access to indigenous identity until recently (Lawrence, 2004). Currently, public discourse in Canada forgets these histories and celebrates
interracial intimacy as a sign of the success of Canadian multiculturalism (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Mahtani, 2014). This idealised political narrative erases these longer histories and obscures ongoing settler colonialism and racism in Canada today.

Deliovsky and Kitossa (2017) reviewing studies of interracial couples in Canada emphasize the need for a critical approach that would focus on “discourse, class, gender, race, sexuality, and other asymmetries of power into conversation with their intrinsic articulations for examining the complexities, contradictions, and joys of interracial couples and families” (p. 133). In this study I place interracial couples’ experiences in the broader context of public discourses such as multiculturalism and take an intersectional approach that grapples with how race, gender, and sexuality shape the experiences of the couples in this study.

In the next section I provide a literature review that situates the four research questions that I outlined earlier.

1.3 Being a Mixed Couple: Making Meaning out of Mixedness

Since race is socially constructed, racial classification is characteristically unstable and how it functions depends on the prevailing context and relations of power. Different criteria that have been employed to classify people into racial categories include ancestry, phenotype, legal/juridical norms, geographical origin, and cultural and often religious values. These criteria vary in significance for racial classification. Even though they are fluid, these classifications are significant because they support racial hierarchies that guide the distribution of power and privilege in society. The history of racial classification reveals how social and political power have produced scientific knowledge on race and played a role in establishing and maintaining social relations of domination and subordination (Baum, 2006). Baum (2006) has argued that race is best understood as a concept by foregrounding the social and political processes of
racialization to capture its historically changing and politically contingent aspect. He explains the process of racialization to be an “ideological representation process whereby social significance is attached to certain (usually phenotypic) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as distinct (racial) collectivity” (Baum, 2006, p. 11). According to Ahmed (2007), the effects of racialization render race to be material, lived, and real.

Scholars have theorised how ideas about race are produced and sustained. Daynes and Lee (2008) define beliefs about race in terms of “social representations that are attached to physical differences” (p. 4). They emphasize the difference between the cognitive and social processes; recognition of physical traits (skin colour, hair, facial features, etc.) between human beings is a cognitive process, but how that difference is perceived is a social process. Race is a collective social representation that refers to difference of phenotype. Thus, race may not have a biological reality, but it does have a historical reality. Daynes and Lee (2008) focus on racial beliefs that attach specific meanings to phenotypes to study the durability of race. They consider four elements to constitute “the racial ensemble: the phenotype, perception of phenotype, belief in race and finally racial practice” (Daynes & Lee, 2008; p. 128). It is the relationship between these elements and not their content that forms the racial ensemble. Hage (2000) criticizes the sociological emphasis on racial beliefs and instead calls for focus on practice to study race. He writes that, “dominant tendency to define racism as a mental phenomenon has continually led to an under-theorisation of the relationship between the mental classification involved and the practices in which they are inserted, between what racists are thinking and what they are doing” (Hage, 2000, p. 29). Some scholars see racial classification as closely related to social practices of racism and examine the role of culture in supporting racial classification and practices.
Race and racism take different forms of expression in different historical and geographical contexts. Goldberg (2009) argues that there is not one generic form of racism. Rather, it is specifically situated in spatial and temporal contexts. He asserts that there has been a shift from biological to cultural racism, and from a focus on natural to historical differences between races. Culture is increasingly being used to mark a group’s racial identity and their place in the system of racial hierarchy, relying on culture for explanations of how race works in society. Culture has become central to the configuration of prevailing forms of racism in Western societies (Goldberg, 1993; 2009; Mamdani, 2004; Razack, 2008).

My focus on mixed couples necessitates a discussion of cultural difference because of how race and cultural are intertwined in practice in the formation of racial identity and community. Couples often understand their racial differences in terms of cultural difference (Nemoto, 2009; Yodanis et al., 2012). Racial identification and classification are also cognitive processes framed by culture. Cognitive processes play an important role in self-making and social identity formation (DiMaggio, 1997; Strauss & Quinn, 1998; Vaisey, 2009; Zerubavel, 1997). Holland (2012) explains how fractured histories separate Black and white communities in the United States. For instance, slavery is described exclusively as a Black experience, ignoring white violence in this history, and the intimate nature of white supremacy. Whites in the United States do not share the same conception of history, especially memories about the trauma of slavery, distancing them from Blacks.

Yodanis et al.’s (2012) study of bilingual couples in Vancouver suggests that such relationships could be understood in terms of the cultural differences between partners.
Individuals in such unions are motivated by a quest for “affiliative ethnic identity,” a concept theorized by Jiménez (2010) as “rooted in knowledge, regular consumption and deployment of an ethnic culture that is unconnected to an individual’s ethnic ancestry until that individual regards herself, and may be regarded by others, as an affiliate of a particular ethnic group” (p. 1758). In other words, it is having a connection or knowledge about a culture which is not one’s own.

In the context of interracial intimacy, it is important to ask what “cultural affiliation” means for the everyday experiences of mixed couples. This requires investigation into the power dynamics that determine what identities can be acquired, who has access to these identities, and how is this connected to the racial structure of society. Yodanis et al. (2012) and Jiménez (2010) concur that whites have disproportional access to affiliative identities, but there is a need to investigate how the process of acquiring affiliative identity is embedded in a context of racial hierarchy and an unequal distribution of power. Jiménez (2010) acknowledges that affiliation is to an extent facilitated by market-driven consumerism. Diversity has become an abstract ideal in practice, and it has been reduced to ethnic consumption without any recognition of privilege or concrete efforts to address inequality (Ahmed, 2002; Burke, 2011). Collins (2005) asserts that the marketplace model of love reduces race to an aesthetic quality. The tendency to view race in transactional terms based on a commodification of racialized otherness that allows exchange of pleasure between equal actors, ignores the fact that racial difference is not just about diversity of cultural aesthetics, but is structured on differences of racialized power in society (Steinbugler, 2012). Baum (2006) points out that “racialized identities have a cultural dimension, but they are primarily a manifestation of unequal power between the group and only secondarily about cultural diversity.” (p. 11)
In this study, I examine how racial boundaries are constituted in intimate relations. Dalmage (2000) calls this “borderism,” which focuses simultaneously on racial identity and identification. I focus on individuals who identify as a mixed couple as well as the historical experiences of the racial communities they identify with. Social identities may provide meaning as affiliation, but they are also tied to relations of domination and oppression. I scrutinize the boundary work that couples perform to create interracial identities that separate them from the stereotypical representation of interracial couples in society (Steinbugler, 2012). Prevailing racial stereotypes and hierarchies lead to situations where individuals describe their own partner as atypical or exceptional, different from their ascribed racial group, and distinct from the stereotypical images of their race (Childs, 2009; Steinbugler, 2012). This process may allow for certain partners of colour to reinforce existing stereotypes and hierarchies.

In this broader context, I focus on how mixed couples make sense of their mixed identity, as they come together to form a partnership. I examine their self-identification as well social recognition in a particular historical context, focusing on how these identities are perceived by others and performed in public. It is imperative to attend to how people can mobilize these while enacting their mixed-couple identity. Culture becomes a strategy as well as a resource for self-making (Swidler, 1986, 2001).

1.4 Possibilities for Racial Literacy

The literature on interracial intimacy asks a wide variety of questions, illuminating the process through which people who express love and desire across racial lines make sense of their experience and the implications this has on the workings of race in society. Scholars have discussed and debated if and how interracial desire and intimacy can potentially lead to anti-
racist consciousness (Childs, 2005; Frankenberg, 1993; Twine, 2010; Twine & Steinbugler, 2006). In her seminal work, Twine (2010) defines racial literacy as follows:

> a reading practice – a way of perceiving and responding to their racial climate and racial structures that individuals encounter daily. Racial literacy includes discursive, material, and cultural practices in which parents can train themselves and their children to recognize, name, challenge, and manage various forms of everyday racism. (p. 8)

Twine’s (2010) concept of racial literacy is formed in the context of parenting practices of white mothers of Black and bi-racial children. These mothers navigate racism against themselves and their children and develop strategies to counter it and equip their children to understand and address it.

Steinbugler (2012) describes how interracial relationships forced white partners to recognize their whiteness as a racial identity because their privileged status allowed them to see themselves as racially unmarked and raceless. Thus, I interrogate how the individual racial identities of each partner are experienced in the context of interracial intimacy. Some of the questions I consider in my analysis, are: Do mixed couples disrupt symbolic boundaries of race by loving across racial lines? Does interracial intimacy present possibilities of anti-racist practice? (Twine, 2010). Is interracial intimacy another process of racialization? (Childs, 2005; Nemoto, 2009). And if yes, then how does it find expression in the everyday lived experiences of mixed couples?

Nemoto’s (2009) study of Asian and white couples in the United States has shown that Asian men and women often choose white spouses because whiteness becomes a desired commodity due to its association with power and privilege. A white spouse offers access to a less stereotyped and racialized identity for upwardly mobile Asian men and women who wish to become part of the American mainstream. This understanding, however, associates whiteness
with being mainstream and American. Ironically, white partners desiring Asian spouses often make their choice based on prevailing cultural schemas about Asians in the United States. Asian women are constructed as submissive, while Asian men are constructed as high achievers and as part of a model minority discourse (Nemoto, 2009).

Although interracial relationships have been called revolutionary (Root, 2001), scholars caution against marking intermarriage as inherently progressive, because they often uphold prevailing hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Steinbugler, 2012; Telles & Sue; 2009; Collins, 2005; Dalmage, 2000; Frankenberg, 1993). According to Telles and Sue (2009), such an outlook is often based on a family-based claim that racism and race mixture cannot coexist. Families with a diversity of racial phenotypes are not expected to practice racism. However, this claim is based on a superficial understanding of race and a romanticized image of family as a harmonious and egalitarian institution. Family has been described as “an indispensable figure for sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests” (McClintock 1995, p. 45). The idealized portrayal of family is challenged by gender disparities and racial inequalities within the family. Empirical studies have reported racial microaggressions faced by interracial couples (Schueths, 2013) and multiracial individuals within their own family (Nadal et al., 2013). Studies on transracial adoption have shown how racial difference can make it more difficult for children to be accepted into their adoptive families, and how their acceptance is contingent on different factors (Dorow, 2006; Kubo, 2010; Quiroz, 2008).

The intimate context of a mixed-couple relationship provides an arena where interpersonal racial dynamics can be studied to advance our understanding of how race is interpreted, negotiated, and experienced in intimate everyday contexts. My dissertation investigates how the couples I interviewed talk about race, racial identity, and racism in
Canadian society. My aim is to show the complexities of the experience of these couples, rather than determining whether their existence and experience signifies racial progress.

1.5 Intersections and Their Implications: How Race, Sexuality and Gender Work Together

Collins’ (1986) discussion of Black feminist thought emphasizes the importance of examining the “interlocking” points of oppression that Black women face through the interplay between their racial and gender locations. Individuals inhabit multiple social locations that frame their social experiences and merit analytical attention. Drawing on the experience of Black women, scholars like Crenshaw (1989) point out the risks of treating race and gender as separate categories of analysis because such an analysis would centre on the experience of privileged members within each discrete category/group – class-privileged Black men and white women. This approach fails to address the particular way in which race and gender intersect in the experiences of subordinate Black women. She writes:

This focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. I suggest further that this focus on otherwise-privileged group members creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon. (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140)

In the quote above, Crenshaw (1989) is underlining the problem of treating race and gender as separate and discrete categories, which leads to scholarship on race focusing on Black men and scholarship on gender focusing on white women. Crenshaw (1989) claims that this disconnect between race and gender erases the experience of Black women from analysis and politics. Collins (2005) argues that new racism is hinged on intersections of gender, class, sexuality, and
race, and thus, the intersection between these social locations requires careful analysis. I examine how race, gender and sexuality intersect in shaping the lived experience of interracial couples. I focus on the intersecting categories of race, gender, and sexuality because those were salient to the experiences narrated by my participants.

Empirical studies investigating mixed couples have shown how race and gender intersect in the context of interracial intimacy. Twine’s study (2010) shows that development of racial literacy can be hindered when working-class white women who had children with Black men privileged gender as a lens, ignoring race to understand their situation. Nemoto (2009) discusses how Asian men and women in mixed relationships face the burden of racialized stereotypes and expectations, which are gender specific. Her study reveals that white men often sought Asian women as spouses, expecting them to be subservient and portraying themselves as liberators of these women from ethnic patriarchy. Childs’ (2009) study of media images of interracial Black and white relationships in the United States illustrates that the sexuality of people of colour, both men and women, is often portrayed in a manner that affirms racial hierarchy. These images present white masculinity as victorious because it wins the devotion of women of colour in ways that suggest white men are superior to men of colour.

White women in interracial relationships experienced a “rebound racism” (Frankenberg 1993, p. 110) from their parents, family members, and peers, which denied them feminine virtue and respectability. Historically, Dalmage (2000) explains, the responsibility for protecting whiteness has been placed on white women and not on white men. White women have been seen as loose for associating with Black men, while white men could associate with Black women, asserting their masculine prowess often in violent ways. Since slavery was abolished in the United States, the specter of the dangerous Black man, who is a threat to white women’s honour,
has been used to justify violence against Black men in the United States (Kennedy, 2004). These calls to protect white women have often been used to reassert racial hierarchies. For instance, in the context of colonial India, the call for social reform against practices like sati was used to support the binary between the “civilized” West and the “barbaric” East, which was articulated in racial terms. Spivak (1988) has described this as the colonial obsession as “white men are saving Brown women from Brown men” (p. 93). This may appear as a double bind in terms of race and gender, where women need to be protected from Black men, and women of colour need to be protected by white men because men of colour are either too weak to offer protection or are the perpetrators of violence themselves. These examples demonstrate how the interplay between race and gender works in the formation and maintenance of racial hierarchies.

The experiences of LGBTQ interracial couples are an under-researched area, and in my dissertation, I include seven same-sex couples and analyse their experiences through an intersectional analysis. Steinbugler’s (2012) comparative research is an exception and fills an important gap in the literature. She concludes that assumptions of monoraciality and heterosexuality are prevalent in how most societies define normative couples (Steinbugler, 2012). She reports that both heterosexual and LGBTQ interracial Black and white couples in the United States faced challenges, but these were different kinds of challenges. Even though these couples shared their interracial status, heterosexual pairs faced hypervisibility and hostility in public spaces, whereas LGBTQ couples faced invisibility (Steinbugler, 2012). Few empirical studies on dating practices and preferences of gay men have discussed the role race plays in shaping the subject of desire (Robinson, 2015).

How stereotypes and expectations associated with race and gender interact in the context of interracial intimacy, merits further investigation. This dissertation pursues this line of inquiry
to study the intersection of race and gender in the individual self-conception and everyday experiences of mixed-race couples. Such an investigation is paramount in the context of romantic partnerships, which are often based on gendered role expectations. How these expectations intersect with racialized ideologies is a primary question that informs this dissertation.

1.6 Narrating the Intimate Experience: Connecting the Personal and the Social

The fourth and final research question guiding this research examines how people’s personal narratives about their mixed relationships interact with larger social narratives about Canadian nationalism and multiculturalism. Narratives play a significant role in the formation of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as people make sense of their lives by constructing narratives about themselves and use these narratives as a medium to share their experiences with others. Human beings organize and communicate experience in narrative form (Gottschall, 2012). Experiences are filtered through language and verbalized into events that enable a sense of coherence and continuity. However, these personal accounts do not emerge in a vacuum; socially situated individuals construct these narratives. People’s narratives have culturally preferred principles of formation even though their purpose is to reveal who people are by presenting their identity claims (Bamberg, 2012). Individuals and groups construct and reconstruct themselves to meet the demands of the situations they encounter.

Personal narratives are based on an individual’s recounting of their experiences, while social narratives emerge in the larger social context, often telling stories about groups and communities, including the nation. My dissertation works on both scales to explore the relationship between personal and social narratives in the context of interracial intimacy. I am particularly attuned to how people construct their experiences into narratives, and how these are shaped by publicly circulating discourses and power structures in society.
Personal stories can be the entry point to larger social and cultural narratives that shape them. Although personal narratives contribute towards the creation of these social narratives, these social narratives can take the form of hegemonic master narratives that categorize people’s experiences (McAdams, 2012). I explore how the larger public narrative about mixed race couples thriving in multicultural Canadian nation (Mahtani, 2014) intersects with personal narratives of mixed couples. In the Canadian context, the narrative of “progressive” multiculturalism frames the discussion around cultural and racial diversity. Mahtani (2014) criticizes the celebration of mixed couples as evidence for the supposed success of multiculturalism in the Canadian context because it ignores racial injustice and historical and ongoing settler colonialism. Similarly, Deliovsy and Kitossa (2017) argue that “the storying of interracial unions is part of a political project for managing difference that avoids difficult discussion about the depth and pervasiveness of racism in Canada” (p. 117).

The Canadian nation weaves a narrative that supports its moral superiority and innocence by using multiculturalism to cement its position as accepting of racial and cultural differences even though it places them in a rigid hierarchy (Thobani, 2007; Parasram, 2019). For Thobani (2007), the dominant narrative of the Canadian nation is

seeking to transform itself from a settler colonial state into a liberal-democratic one, and hence claim legitimacy as guarantor of the interests of all these various sectors, official multiculturalism became a diffusing or a muting device for the deeply entrenched conflicts of race. (p. 150)

These dynamics also shape the experiences of mixed-race couples. Personal narratives hold the potential to interrupt and reframe master narratives by representing people’s agency. Thus, narratives can shift over time, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of their power. For instance, Bruner (2002) discusses how the narrative of race in American society changed over
time, demanding constitutional justice for Blacks as victims of racism and inequality in society. However, the narrative shifted again, and whites came to be seen as the victims of policies that were favouring Blacks. These larger narrative shifts affect how groups and individuals craft their own narratives. Shuman (2012) opines, “the failure to merge the personal and the public creates a gap, or multiple gaps, whether in the form of counter-narratives, coming from the personal as a rejection of the public discourse” (p. 140). The personal narratives of the participating couples are both constituted by – and present a potential challenge to – the larger public narrative of progressive multiculturalism dominant in the Canadian context.

Narratives play a formative role in construction of identities for groups and individuals, in terms of who they are, who they are not, and what they want to be (Riessman, 2008). Couples in this study narrate their stories and contribute to a larger narrative about mixed couples in Canada and the Canadian nation. How individuals construct their mixed couple identity and how they see themselves as individuals in a mixed relationship, are significant questions to be investigated if we are gain understanding of how interracial intimacy is experienced by those in mixed-race relations in society. This dissertation examines how these intimate narratives can be read within and related to larger social and public narratives about race and diversity in Canadian society. The personal stories of these couples provide an entry into understanding the circulation of broader social and cultural narratives. The stories people can potentially disrupt larger social narratives, and I focus on these disruptions.

The participants’ stories about their lives cannot be read as individual choices but must be placed in a larger social context within prevailing modes of thinking about race and interracial intimacy. I examine how larger public narratives about the progressive and multicultural Canadian nation, or the settler-colonial Canadian nation, may shape mixed couples’ personal
narratives. I examine how mixed-race couples constitute their own identities as individuals and as a couple, and how their experiences coalesce with or challenge the larger narratives about interracial intimacy that circulate in Canada. In the following section I reflect on my own position as a researcher and how it may have influenced this research.

1.7 Positionality and Reflexivity

A valuable strength of feminist and critical race perspectives is that they consider knowledge to be socially situated. Feminist scholars have long encouraged researchers to reflect on their own positions in the process of conducting research. Harding’s (1993) theoretical construct of “strong objectivity” favours reflexivity and consciousness of one’s own position in research and encourages researchers to acknowledge that one’s background is important to the interpretation of research and research findings. Harding (1993) argues that the structures organising race, gender, class, and sexuality lead to a distribution of privilege and disadvantage in society that affects the production of knowledge. All forms of knowledge are socially situated, and theorising from marginalized standpoints can contribute to knowledge by providing insights that are not accessible from dominant standpoints. Feminist perspectives encourage researchers to reflect on their own positionality, including their “subjectivity and subjective knowledge” (Naples, 2007, p. 551). Building on the perspectives of feminist scholars has encouraged me to reflect on the ways that my own social position as a cisgender woman of colour in a mixed heterosexual marriage, as an international student at University of British Columbia, and a new immigrant in Canada has shaped my interactions with the couples that I interviewed.

My awareness of my own racial identity became heightened after I moved to Canada from India and as I began to identify myself as a South Asian woman. It was in Canada that I started calling myself a person of colour for the first time, as I became more conscious of my
race, and I felt a need to show solidarity with other people of colour. When I joined the PhD program at UBC, I was planning to focus my research on caste-based violence in India. I wanted to explore similarities between racism and casteism as ideologies that upheld structures of power, and which placed people in hierarchies of worth and value. However, through my coursework and in my own experiences of being a racialized immigrant in Canada, I developed an interest in how race worked in intimate settings. Although I am in a heterosexual interracial partnership with a white Norwegian man, I do not believe my decision to study interracial intimacy stemmed directly or consciously from my own experience of being in an interracial relationship. I chose to research the experiences of interracial couples because it offered me a way to move away from spectacular forms of racism and racial violence and to study quotidian experiences and practices of racism.

As a new immigrant, my interests were aimed at situating interracial intimacy in the multicultural context of the Canadian nation. As a part of the doctoral program, and to prepare for my research, I wrote two comprehensive exams, one on racial inequality and one on cultural sociology, which offered concepts and theoretical approaches that I could use to study interracial intimacy. In addition, I taught an undergraduate course on the diversity of family forms, which only reinforced my interest in studying mixed families, and which contributed towards my conceptualization of this study. But as I point out above, my participants challenged my formulations and pushed me to think in ways that I did not always foresee. For example, our perceptions and definitions of race and racial identity did not always match, which highlights the fluidity of these concepts allowing for multiple interpretations in different situations.

As a woman of colour in an interracial marriage, I believe my position in relation to this study is best encapsulated by Collins’ (1986) construct of being “an insider outsider.” The
positions of insider and outsider do not have fixed boundaries. All of us are placed in intersecting domains of privilege and marginality that shift based on context (Merriam et al., 2001), as we inhabit multiple subject positions (Pillow, 2003). My visible social identity as a South Asian woman and the impression it made on my participants could potentially have affected the interview process and what they decided to share with me. Being in a mixed relationship myself, I conveyed my social identity and relationship with some of my participants. Although this did not provide me with a privileged point of view, my identity and experiences potentially influenced the research process. For example, Vasquez-Tokos (2017), who also interviewed interracial couples, found that sharing multiple social statuses facilitated rapport building with her participants. Many of my participants felt more comfortable with me after I shared the fact that I was also in a mixed relationship. However, in practice the insider-outsider dynamic was complex, and I discuss it in greater details in Chapter 2.

I always met the participants together as a couple, and I spoke to them about my study and myself. I described myself as an Indian student studying at UBC and told them that they could ask me any questions regarding my study or my own history and identity. In the first meeting, the participants often asked me questions about myself and my background. Most of them were particularly interested in my immigrant background from India and whether I planned to stay on in Canada after my studies. I did not volunteer the fact that I was in a mixed relationship to my participants, but it often came up in the conversation when we discussed my interest in the subject and about my living situation in Vancouver; whether I lived alone or had a family. In some cases, I was asked more specific questions about my partner, his national background and how we met. In one case a participant directly asked me about his racial background, and I told him he was a white man.
Sometimes their questions bothered me because I was concerned that the focus should be on the participants. However, at the same time, considering that I was asking them intimate questions about their own relationships, I was not in a position to refuse to answer their questions. At times I felt uncomfortable when participants asked me questions about how race played a part in my own relationship. This only happened a few times and forced me to turn the gaze inwards. I tried to keep my answers honest and brief. I did not face a lot of follow-ups because the premise of the conversation was that it was an interview where I had the role of the researcher whose job is to ask questions and gather information, even though we occasionally departed from it. Several of my participants were recruited through my own social network, and there is a likelihood that they were already aware of my being in a mixed marriage. Three of them knew my partner as an acquaintance through the university, as he was also pursuing a PhD at UBC from a different faculty at the time of my interviews.

I have often reflected on how my identity as a cisgendered woman of colour may influence interviews with my participants. My gender played a role in certain situations in the interview process where female participants were able to open up to me and talk about how their gender impacted their experiences and informed the racial dynamics in their relationship. I had a situation where a participant cried during the interview, and I am not sure if she would necessarily have displayed emotions in such a way if I were a man. At the same time, I noticed that in some of my individual interviews with white men, I needed to go an extra mile to reassure them that they were in a safe place, and I would not use their responses to judge them unfavourably. This did not happen when I interviewed white women. Here, I believe gender came into play, as women often assume the burden of making others feel more comfortable.
(Hochschild, 2012; Koo, 2020). Most of the female participants expressed solidarity with me as a woman, irrespective of their race.

My sexual orientation did not seem to affect how LGBTQ participants received me. My participants may have interpreted my credentials as a PhD student to mean that I was open minded and accepting of difference. In my call for interviews, I did not restrict the field of study to heterosexual couples, and by doing so, I set LGBTQ couples at par with heterosexual couples. This may have also been interpreted as an implicit sign of recognition and acceptance. I would not go as far as to say that they saw me as an ally, but they were open about sharing their experiences with me. In fact, at times they took time to explain things about the LGBTQ scene in Vancouver they thought I may not be familiar with. It appeared that the participants deemed it important that I realise that race played a role in LGBTQ couples’ lives, but their experiences were often different from those of heterosexual couples. The only question some of the participants asked me was how many other LGBTQ couples I have interviewed, and my answers were well received.

However, sharing an identity with research participants did not mean I could assume affinity with them. In one instance, one of the participants, Rajesh\textsuperscript{2}, a South Asian man of Indian descent who was in a relationship with a white woman who was an American and Canadian citizen, told me that he was alarmed when his partner suggested they talk with me. He had received a great deal of disapproval from the Indian community for being in a mixed relationship. Because I was Indian, he was suspicious of my motives. In this case our shared nationality and racial-cultural background led him to distrust me. When we met for the couples’

\textsuperscript{2} The names of all people and places in this dissertation have been anonymized through the use of pseudonyms.
interview, he asked me directly about my interest in studying mixed couples. During our conversation, I mentioned that I was in a mixed relationship myself, and that seemed to allay his concerns. Rajesh told me that he was not sure whether an Indian woman could understand his story. Once he found out that I was in a mixed relationship, he began to trust me. Thus, my identity as an Indian woman was a source of suspicion, and my involvement in a mixed relationship a point of trust.

My identification with feminist research ethics, my self-awareness of my social location, as well as my perspectives and assumptions enabled me to navigate challenging moments in the research process. Pillow (2003) contends that reflexivity does not mean that one can transcend one’s own subjectivity and represent the other transparently. Rather, Pillows (2003) encourages researchers to practice “uncomfortable reflexivity,” whereby they accept the limits of the representations they create but acknowledge the social and political need for representation. Researchers’ representation of the reality of their participants is flawed, but there is a value in representing the reality of these participants through research. In the next section, I discuss the challenges I faced in representing race in my work.

1.8 Race and Representation in Research

In the course of this research, I have had to constantly grapple with choices regarding how I represent my research subjects’ racial and ethnic identities. My choices are framed by the complexity of race, which operates as a social construct that is simultaneously rendered real due to its power to structure people’s everyday experiences and orientations (Ahmed, 2007). by distributing privilege and disadvantage in a society. Race operates as a key organizing principle that sorts people within a broad system of social difference and hierarchy. Even though race is a
socially constructed classification, it has tangible implications on how individuals and groups are perceived by others, their self-conceptions, and their life chances.

In this dissertation I attempted to capture the meanings that individual participants attached to their own racial and ethnic identities. During the individual interviews, I asked the participants how they identified themselves, and then more specifically, how they identified their racial and ethnic identity. The participants talked about the different ways in which they identified themselves, often starting with identities that they felt were more significant to their everyday experience, and race was often one of them. My participants also named their gender, nationality, class, and sexual orientation as they reflected on their identity. The fact that all my participants name their race certainly reflects their assessment of its relevance to their lives and to my study. Since all the participants agreed to an interview for research on interracial couples, their participation assumed a certain degree of conscious awareness and assessment of their racial identity. In the chapter on methodology, I go into further detail of my process of recruitment and the challenges associated with it.

For many of my participants, taking about their racial and ethnic identification was not straightforward. They reflected on the dual nature of identity and the gap between how they saw themselves and how others might identify them. For instance, Roq, who identifies as Black, mentioned that she would like to call herself Fijian, as she was born in Fiji, and it is her nationality and ethnic identity. But people read her as Black due to her skin colour. She feels a sense of solidarity with other Black people in Canada and the United States, who are treated a certain way due to their blackness. Waters (1990) has explained that the option of identifying oneself in ethnic terms if often not available to people of colour, who are externally classified in terms of their race. Whites, by contrast, can choose between a range of options. However, this
creates a situation where people of colour, such as Roq, experience limitations on their ability to 
define themselves. Many of my participants who are multiracial, felt their options for defining 
themselves were limited by how they were perceived by others. Elizabeth, who has an Indian 
mother and a white Canadian father, is more comfortable with calling herself Canadian and 
multiracial than Indian, even though she is often identified by others as such. While Dean, who 
has an Indian mother and a Scottish-Canadian father, talked about how he has a Scottish first and 
last name, but when people meet him, they are confused because he appears “Brown rather than 
white.”

In my conversations with my participants, they often used racial and ethnic labels to 
describe themselves as “white Canadian,” others as “Brown Arab.” The term “Canadian” was 
often used by people who added descriptors to describe their identity. Race and ethnicity can be 
demarcated as distinct concepts, but in everyday experience they can assume an overlapping 
basis of identification (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Loveman (1999) argues that the tendency in 
the scholarship to separate race and ethnicity presents a North American bias, contrasting this 
with limited racial consciousness in other parts of the world, such as Brazil. Scholars see 
etnicity as more malleable than race and offering more scope for self-definition instead of being 
externally marked (Bonilla-Silva, 1999). However, access to self-definition has historically been 
limited for people of colour in comparison to whites (Waters, 1990). At times, the conflation of 
race and ethnicity leads to drawing parallels between racial minorities and ethnic immigrant 
groups, like Jews, Irish, and Italians, who were historically racialized, but eventually re- 
categorized as white and assimilated into mainstream American society. According to Bonilla-
Silva (1997), this ideology fosters the belief that racial minorities can overcome racism if they 
adopt the norms of the “mainstream” society.
Waters (1990) argues that the ethnic resurgence of the 1970s has been a function of a backlash against racially progressive policies like affirmative action. Discussion of their ethnicity allows white Americans to equate discrimination experienced by their ancestors in the past with the discrimination experienced by people of colour today. Cornell and Hartmann (1998) claim that the idea of ethnicity is centered on the assumption of power to define one’s own identity, and whites monopolize this power, because of which there is little written about ethnic difference between non-whites. Thus, following Waters (1990) and Cornell and Hartmann (1998), I argue that race and ethnicity are cognate concepts, but it is important to recognise their difference to accurately reflect their impact on peoples’ lives. Omi and Winant (1994) asserted that the tendency to see race as a part of ethnicity ignores the experience of racial minorities with racial exclusion, slavery, and colonialism. By and large scholars have maintained a distinction between race and ethnicity, although acknowledging the close proximity and possible overlap between them. Mahtani (2002, p. 71) argues that in the Canadian context, the concept of “racialized ethnicities” is useful to understand the question of identity. She explains that the official multicultural policy encourages individuals to affiliate with a culture and provides a framework for inclusion into the nation through ethnic identification.

Most of the participants in my study mentioned their different identities, often in hyphenated terms, which became salient in different contexts, signalling the fluidity of identity. A participant, Bob, who is American and white, emphasized his Southern heritage when he lived in the United States, but in Canada he becomes a white American. Liv, who has Québécois heritage from her mother’s side and Indian and Punjabi heritage from her father’s, is able to pass as white due to her light skin. But when she talks, her French accent immediately makes her
Québécois heritage apparent, marking her as different in Vancouver. Racial/ethnic identity and racialization are indexed on multiple registers: visual, auditory, and cultural.

A significant point of inquiry in this dissertation centers on how white people articulated their racial identity. White as a racial category is often seen as an unmarked norm, in spite of its power in shaping people’s orientations and life chances (Ahmed, 2007). According to Frankenberg (1999) white individuals and groups are seen to have neither race nor culture, which allows for whiteness to function as a norm in society and to exclude those who are outside of it. Many of the participants in my study who identified themselves as white, discussed the racial privilege whiteness confers on them. However, some of them did not feel comfortable with identifying as white. Rick, who is Canadian-born, expressed his discomfort about calling himself white. He used the term Caucasian at first, and then clarified that he would be called white, but he found the term problematic because he associated it with white supremacy. He said he felt that people who would use the term white to describe themselves would be asserting their racial superiority. He preferred the term Caucasian but defined it vaguely as indicating his ethnic ancestry and origin. Despite his discomfort with the term white, Rick was able to see how he had privileges that his wife Ligaya, a Filipino woman, did not enjoy. Similarly, many other participants I interviewed discussed how their awareness of their whiteness became heightened by the experience of being in an interracial relationship. In chapter four, I go into further detail of how the race consciousness of white partners was influenced by being in an interracial relationship.

“The construction of whiteness functioned epistemologically and ontologically as a prism through which the Other was constructed and rendered subhuman” (Yancy, 2012, p. 108). Whiteness as race is also a construct and its boundaries shift based on context. Whiteness is not a
stable category, and it can be “unwhitened” in the case of poor whites (Stoler, 1995) or white women in interracial marriages (Frankenberg, 1993; Twine, 2010). Some of the participants in my study discussed how their whiteness was compromised by their other identities. For instance, Jacque, who is Québécois, explained that in the Canadian context, whiteness is exemplified by the English. He said,

> We talked about the dominant white culture, and I felt awkward because I am – when we talk about the white culture – I am from the minority in the white culture and the white race. So, to me, I’m not a dominant, because in Montreal and Quebec those who dominate the culture are the rich English people. They are at the top of the food chain in Montreal, it’s not the white French people, it’s the English white people.

He felt his French and Québécois background separated him from the dominant white culture. Similarly, Jon, a gay white man, talked about how his queerness and his growing up in a working-class neighbourhood mitigated his access to dominant whiteness. The experiences of these men do not mean that they are not affected by the racial hierarchy that confers white privilege, but they underline the fragmented nature of whiteness. The intersection of Jacque and Jon’s ethnic background and social class undermined their racial privilege.

The diffuse nature of whiteness was also supported by participants who identified with it but could not fully embrace it. Elizabeth, who is mixed race with an Indian mother and a white Canadian father, talked about how her upper middle-class upbringing in white majority neighbourhoods made her feel like she was white, even when she didn’t look white. “I consider myself often to be white, like inside, like North American, like for me that’s all the same.” However, lack of external recognition of her whiteness meant she could not fully embrace it. One of the participants in this study, Blue, a Turkish woman married to a white Dutch man, identified herself as white and Caucasian. She was aware of the fact that a lot of people may not see Turks as white and European, and she emphasized how she was different from the other
Turkish people who were conservative and religious, which in her opinion confirmed her whiteness. She associated whiteness more broadly with Western and modern values and skin colour.

The conversation about racial and ethnic identity with my participants was a complex one, which reflects the nature of the subject. Race is a socially constructed identity, albeit with real social consequences, whose meaning can shift in different contexts. This contributes to problems of representation as a researcher when one describes and writes about race. In the next section I discuss challenge this presented for me in writing this thesis.

1.9 Representing Race in Writing

While writing this thesis I had to grapple with another significant decision: How would I address representation in my writing when I described my participants’ racial identity? Would I capitalise B for Black and W for white? There has been a debate on whether “black” or “Black” should be used in academic and journalistic writing. On June 19, 2020, following George Floyd’s murder by the police in the United States and the discussion of racial injustice, Associated Press changed its policy to capitalize “Black” when the word is used in “a racial, ethnic or cultural context” (Carswell, 2020, para. 2). This was read as recognition that Black is not just a skin colour but signifies a shared identity in the American context. It has been argued that people whose ancestral lineage is lost to the transatlantic slave trade should be considered ethnically Black (Salami, 2021). However, Salami (2021) asserts that conflating a racial identity with an ethnic identity can limit how Black people identify themselves. She does not favour capitalising “B” in Black. It could be argued that if Black is seen as a noun, then the same could also be extended to Brown or white. However, this choice becomes problematic in a political and
historical context where he use of white with a capital “W” as a writing style often done by white supremacist groups (Carswell, 2020; Perlman, 2015; Viscounti, 2020).

Viscounti (2020) supports capitalisation of “B” in Black while not capitalising white at the same time because according to him, white people have the option of describing themselves through ethnic markers, while Blacks in the American context are often descendants of slaves and often do not have the option of identifying with their specific ethnic origin. Laws (2020) has supported capitalisation of “B” in Black and not “W” in white because he believes it reflects a sense of shared history, ethnic origin, and identity at par with other denominations of identity like “Asian” or “African American,” which are already capitalized.

I struggled with the right way to address participants who used terms Black, Brown, or white to describe their racial and ethnic identity. Initially I decided to capitalise B because of a long history of struggle by Black activists to get recognition for Black as a marker of identity in a context of racial injustice. But then I was confronted by the dilemma of whether this should be extended to other signifiers of racial and cultural identity, like Brown, which have historically been placed in a subordinate position in a racial hierarchy dominated by white. However, specific experience of slavery sets Black as apart from other racial signifiers such as Brown, which is closely tied to skin colour and not origin. The Canadian context may not have the same experience of slavery as the United States, but the historical, symbolic, and cultural significance of blackness is still relevant.

However, Black is not the only way to describe people. Two of the participants in my study who identified as Black, also identified as Fijian and Caribbean, respectively, but they considered their blackness as more central to their experience of race and racism than their ethnic and national origin.
At the same time, it is important that marking Black as a specific experience does not separate it from its historical context and naturalize it (Hall, 1993). Stuart Hall (1993) contends that in spite of the specificity of the Black experience, it is important to highlight the diversity of the Black experience instead of its homogeneity. He writes, “The moment the signifier ‘black’ is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct” (p. 111). Hall (1993) is writing in the context of Black popular culture, and he favours using race as an analytical category in relation to others.

I opted to capitalize Black because I am writing this thesis in a context where blackness has been targeted by systemic violence as evidenced in the experience of Black people with the police in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere (Glover, 2020). Jardina (2019) suggests that white identity is largely reactive when its dominance is threatened and produced as a defense of racial privilege. He contrasts this with Black identity, which he claims emerges from a long history of racial subordination and discrimination Blacks have experienced, coupled with Black elite efforts to foster a strong group consciousness among their group” (Jardina, 2019, p. 46). In this context, I am choosing to capitalise “B” in Black and Brown and not capitalise “W” in white, recognizing the salience of the relations of domination and marginalisation between the two groups and the different mechanisms of identity formation in play.

1.10 Organisation of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The four substantive chapters are organised around the research questions that have guided my research. Chapter 1 provides an insight into the research process and methodology. This is a qualitative study that centers on 87 interviews I conducted with 29 mixed couples who I interviewed together and separately from 2016 to 2017.
I discuss the narrative analysis approach I took while making sense of the interview material and how I transcribed and coded them.

Rather than taking mixed race for granted, Chapter 2 explores what mixedness meant for the interracial couples in my study. In this chapter, I critically examine how couples perceive, inhabit, and experience their mixed couple identity. I ask: How is the mixed-couple identity experienced, articulated and performed, and how do these couples think others perceive them and their intimate relations?

In chapter 3, I explore the concept of racial literacy as developed by Twine (2010). Specifically, I explore the claim that interracial intimacy might lead to racial literacy, and ask how couples and partners, especially white partners become conscious – if at all – of the role that race plays in Canadian society. I closely examine how these couples talk about race, racial identity, and racism in Canadian society in context of their relationship and their romantic preferences.

Chapter 4 presents an intersectional analysis of my interview data by focusing on how race, sexuality, and gender intersect in the intimate domain of mixed couples. This chapter centers the LGBTQ couples that I interviewed for my study and considers how their experiences of mixedness compare with the experiences of heterosexual couples. In this chapter, I also focus on how racial stereotypes are connected to gendered and heteronormative expectations in the context of interracial intimacy.

In the fifth chapter, I engage with national narratives of Canadianness and interrogate the role of multiculturalism in Canada. I examine how couples’ personal narratives about their experiences and identity shaped by the larger public narratives about the supposedly progressive
and multicultural Canadian nation. How are the broader public narratives reinforced, reimagined, or challenged by the personal narratives of these couples?

In the conclusion, I summarise the key findings, the limits of my study, and suggest possible directions for future research in the area.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Chad: I was talking to my friend, and he said there were no right answers, but there could be wrong answers.

Interviewer: There are no wrong answers. It’s just to get a sense of your experience.

In this chapter I describe the methodology I used for interviewing the participants for my research. This dissertation draws on semi-structured interviews. First, I interviewed couples together, and later individually. I describe the ethical, methodological, and theoretical considerations I engaged with as a researcher and interviewer through the interactions with my participants. I give details on how I analyzed the data to draw my conclusions. Further, I discuss how power dynamics may play out in the research process.

The quote above is taken from one of my interviews, and I believe it offers a useful opening into the process of interaction between the researcher and the participant. As the interviewer, I had the opportunity to ask questions of my participant/interviewee who had agreed to answer them. In a sense, as the interviewer I set the frame for the conversation through my questions, but it is the interviewees’ responses that shaped the course and content of my research. The interview process was a dialogue with my respondents where we both contributed to the outcome. Thus, research is a process where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the interviewee and interviewer (Talmy, 2010).

In the opening vignette, my participant Chad was worried that his answers to my questions may not be appropriate. I tried to reassure him that through my questions I was trying to learn more about his experiences of being in a mixed relationship and thus positioned him as an expert. I tried to highlight that there were no wrong answers in my study. I took an approach which is focused on the social construction of reality and the process of meaning making that
people are engaged in, instead of taking a positivist approach to reality as objective and measurable. I did not expect my participants’ accounts to be “the truth,” but a specific telling of their experience and their opinion of it. I followed the interpretivist approach outlined by Roth and Mehta (2002), which “does not seek an objective truth so much as to unravel patterns of subjective understanding” (p. 132).

I was interested in Chad’s experience and his way of seeing the world and making sense of it. However, Chad was aware that by sharing his life with me, he was exposing his utterances to my interpretations, and he was worried about how his answers may appear from the perspective of my study or myself as a researcher. Although he had agreed to participate in my study, he still felt vulnerable. Chad is a white Canadian man in a mixed relationship. I first interviewed him along with his fiancé, and later I interviewed him and his fiancé separately. He admitted to being nervous in the second interview since he felt he might come across as racist by saying something he did not mean. Chad’s dilemma can be read from his position as a white man, the fact that I am a woman of colour as well as the context of research, and the subject matter that dealt with race and racism. This highlights the significance of the sociality of the interview process as the interview is an interaction between people in a specific context. My role as a researcher was not only to ask the questions, but also to build a rapport with the participants where they understood their role, the purpose of the research, and felt safe and trusted their experience to be valued. The approach I took to my research and the choices I made as a researcher are elaborated upon in this chapter.

2.1 Description of the Study

My study is a qualitative inquiry that analyzes how mixed couples framed themselves in their interview narratives in relation to prevailing social attitudes and constructions about interracial
relationships. In their review of the literature on interracial relationships, Telles and Sue (2009) suggest, “On a methodological note, we encourage scholars of intermarriage to look beyond intermarriage rates and also rely on qualitative and ethnographic data to better understand the racial dynamics between couples in these relationships” (p. 140). I do this by examining the everyday experiences of mixed couples, the quotidian social practices in which they are engaged, and the meanings they attach to race in their relationships. The research participants for this study are not representative of the population, so the findings cannot be generalized. However, the study contributes towards a theoretical generalization of ideas (Suter, 2012) in order to make sense of the varied experiences of mixed couples in Canada.

In the Canadian context, the term “mixed union” refers to a couple in which one spouse or partner belongs to a visible minority group and the other is white. It is also used to describe a couple in which the two partners belong to different visible minority groups (Statistics Canada, 2014). The Employment Equity Act, 1995 has defined visible minorities as “persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada, 2014). In the U.S. context, studies that focus on couples in which each person belongs to a different racial group are often termed interracial. I have drawn extensively from this literature because there are relatively few studies on mixed unions in the Canadian context (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Hamplova & Le Bourdais, 2010). Although I am drawing on the definition of mixed unions used by Statistics Canada throughout this dissertation, I use the terms interracial couple, mixed couple, and mixed union interchangeably, which reflects the general terms used in the sociological literature. Hamplova and Le Bourdais (2010), in their quantitative study of mixed unions in three Canadian metropolitan cities, have used the term interracial. A fuller
discussion on mixedness is found in Chapter 3, where I discuss how mixed couples articulate their identity and experience.

The data for my study is comprised of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 heterosexual and six LGBTQ couples that identified themselves as mixed couples from the Greater Vancouver area. Vancouver is a gateway metropolitan city in Canada with a large proportion of visible minorities and immigrants, well above the national average (Hamplova & Le Bourdais, 2010). At the time that I collected the data for my study, the city also had the largest percentage of mixed couples in Canada at 9.6% (Statistics Canada, 2014). As a result, I viewed Vancouver be an ideal city in which to conduct research into mixed couples, given its highly diverse social context that lends itself to more opportunities for intimacy between different racial groups.

Initially, I had planned on interviewing 20 heterosexual mixed couples and five additional mixed couples that did not fit this description but regarded themselves as a mixed couple for the purpose of comparison. However, I decided to increase the sample size, as some of the couples I interviewed had characteristics that provided helpful opportunities for engaging with questions of intersectionality and the meanings of mixedness. Although I initially used the official definition to guide my understanding of mixedness, my analysis was very much shaped by my participants; the couples I interviewed had their own ideas about mixedness, which often challenged the official definition of mixed couples given by Statistics Canada (2011). I included LGBTQ couples, not least since this provided an opportunity to engage with how race and sexuality intersected to shape different experiences of being a mixed couple. One of the participating couples consisted of two white partners, but they also identified themselves as a
mixed couple because one of the partners had a Québécois background and the other identified as Anglo-Canadian.

This couple – Ann, a white Anglo-Canadian woman and Jacque, a white Québécois Canadian man – expressed interest in being part of my study. I met them at a friend’s party and when they heard about my study, they told me that they would like to be a part of it. They believed their differences were beyond regular ethnic differences. In the interview, Ann pointed out:

If you look at the history of Canada, they talk about the founding races originally. The French race and the English race and that has been replaced by the word nation. So now we talk about nations and Quebec is now called a distinct society.

I decided to include them in my study because I thought they provided insights into how racial difference is constructed in the Canadian context.

Canada is a settler-colonial country where British and French colonial settlers continue to dominate Indigenous nations, both historically and in the present context (Mackey, 2002). The Québécois identity in Canada historically emerged through an ethnic movement for preservation of French language, identity, and cultural heritage, and in opposition to political domination exercised by the Anglo-Canadian majority (Boyd, 2015). The multiculturalism policy of the Canadian state emerged as a response to this tension and has subsequently focused on strengthening French and English as official languages and preserving diversity and cultural heritage of Canadians at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Haque (2014) describes how “the two founding races” expression was recast as the two founding nations during the debates in the Royal Commission for Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963–70). In this new national formulation, English and French groups were portrayed as being on equal footing as the two “founders” of Canada, while all other groups were reduced as cultural and ethnic minorities. The
claims by indigenous communities as having First Nations status were erased and subordinated by leaving them explicitly out of this new formulation for national belonging (Haque, 2014). In this context, a Québécois identity remains significant for understanding how difference is constructed and recognised in Canada. Alba and Nee (2003) wrote, “Interracial marriage is so commonplace among whites that its occurrence is no longer remarkable. In this sense, one could even say that it has ceased to be intermarriage to its participants because they no longer recognize that a social boundary is being crossed” (p. 91). However, Ann and Jacque insisted that the boundary between them was significant, and given the Canadian context, I decided to include their experience. The official definition of mixed couples put forth by Statistics Canada served as an initial guide for my study. However, the ways in which some of the couples defined themselves (their interpretations of mixedness) extensively shaped my views on the subject. In the next two sections, I describe the process of collecting and analyzing the data for this study.

### 2.2 Data Collection: Recruiting my Participants

My study is based on the experiences of interracial couples in long-term relationships. Specifically, I recruited adult couples residing in the greater Vancouver area that had lived together for two or more years to share their experiences with me. The couples included married as well as common-law partners. Initially, I had planned to recruit 20 heterosexual mixed couples in total; 10 composed of a white and a non-white partner, and the other 10 including partners belonging to different visible minority groups. Previous studies had pointed out the lack of mixed-race studies focussing on non-white mixed couples (Mahtani, 2014). I hoped to break out of the non-white–white binary to understand how race shapes identity and interactions more broadly.
However, my efforts to recruit non-white mixed couples turned out to be more difficult than I expected. I was only able to recruit three mixed couples without a white partner. Demographic factors contribute towards predominance of white partners in interracial relationships (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017). It turns out that this smaller number reflects the Canada-wide composition of mixed couples. As I mentioned in the introduction, in 2011, 4.6 per cent of all Canadian couples were mixed, out of which 3.9 per cent of all couples included a white partner, while 0.7 per cent of all couples included partners from different visible minority groups (Statistics Canada 2014). The 2016 census data on mixed couples has not been reported by statistics Canada. However, Aathavan (2021) has reported that the numbers of mixed couples has increased to 7.3% for all mixed unions with 6.7% being between a white and visible minority group partner, and 0.6% being between partners of different visible minority groups. This demonstrates a significant rise in the overall numbers of mixed couples, while the numbers of mixed couples without white partners continues to be low.

Couples were recruited through notices (see, Appendix A) placed in public spaces, including cafés, community libraries, and social media pages. I circulated a recruitment call through Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR), an organization promoting interracial relations and diversity in Vancouver. I also recruited through snowball sampling. I asked my interviewees to forward a recruitment email (See, Appendix C) to other potential participants that they identified as suitable. It was up to these potential participants to contact me and participate in the study. This recruitment strategy helped me to tap into different social networks. I also attended a few events organized by SIETAR and discussed my research with people there. In an attempt to recruit couples with Black partners, as they were underrepresented in my sample, I attended a film series on Black History Month at Granville
Island and spoke to people about my research. I managed to recruit two couples though this event. I also tried to reach out to potential participants through my social media account on Facebook; some of my friends also shared my call for research participants. This snowballed and some of the couples interested in participating in my study contacted me through social media.

My sample includes a range of participants: those who have recently immigrated to Canada as well as second-generation individuals born in Canada. The experiences of those involved in mixed unions are often affected by their immigration status, which shapes their integration into Canadian society (Hande et al., 2019). Immigration status also informs people’s specific experiences with racism (Schueths, 2013). Many of my participants of colour who were first-and-second generation, described being racialized in specific ways that related to their immigration status. Following Creese (2020), I use second-generation to refer to those who were born in Canada or who migrated as children.

My sample also included seven LGBTQ mixed couples. Steinbugler (2012) studied experiences of LGBTQ and heterosexual interracial couples in public spaces. She argues that LGBTQ interracial mixed couples are an under-researched group within the studies on mixed couples (Steinbugler, 2012). She reported that LGBTQ mixed couples face different kinds of challenges even though they share an interracial status. For example, she describes that LGBTQ interracial couples face invisibility in public spaces and people do not read them as a romantic couple due to heteronormative expectations of couples constituting two people of opposite genders.

and how we inhabit a given category depends on how we inhabit others” (p. 159). Following Ahmed (2007), I focus on how LGBTQ mixed-race couples navigated their experiences as a couple. The decision to include these couples helped me to gain additional analytical insights into how mixedness is experienced and perceived through heteronormativity, sexuality, and sexual identities for both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples.

Out of the 29 couples that I interviewed, 15 were married, and 14 were in a common law partnership. Six of the couples had children at the time of the interviews. Seven couples were LGBTQ (3 lesbian and 4 gay), and 22 couples were straight. The age groups of the participants varied from 27 to 77 years at the time of the study. 55 out of 58 participants had a university degree or some college education. All the participants were professionally employed or studying at the university level, except two female participants who had stopped working to take on childcare responsibilities. Most of the participants considered themselves to be a part of the middle class. The manner in which the participants talked about race and racialization displayed an ‘educated’ language and a fair amount of interest and knowledge of social issues and political discussions about race. They belonged to a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups. A description of my participants’ racial identity based on their self-reporting is presented in Appendix B. Six of the participants, four women and two men, had a multiracial background. Two of the couples were no longer together when I last heard from them. Pepe, a Japanese man raised in Colombia and his wife Alana, a Colombian woman, had been married for 15 years, but had separated shortly before they contacted me to participate in my study. They were in the process of discussing their divorce when I met them. Pepe approached me after hearing about the study and told me immediately that he and his wife Alana were undergoing a separation, but they would like to participate to reflect on their relationship.
Similarly, Anita, a White Canadian woman who was partnered with Kris, a Korean Canadian man, approached me to participate after she learnt about the study from a social media call for recruitment. She and Kris broke up a few months after the interviews were completed. Anita jokingly reassured me that their break-up had nothing to do with their participation in my study or their mixed status. They had developed different ideas about what they wanted from a relationship. For instance, when they first got together, they both decided they did not want children. However, Kris was rethinking this. Nonetheless, my initial reaction to the news of their breakup was a sense of guilt. During the couple interview I had with them, they had discussed these differences, which came up in conversation about the future of their relationship. Anita’s reassuring remarks assuaged my doubts. I also reminded myself that a single conversation can only have a limited impact on the life decisions of my participants. The interview, I assured myself, only allowed for an articulation of differences that were already there and had been discussed between the couple beforehand. Nevertheless, this particular experience made me reflect on the ethics of my research.

2.3 Ethics

According to Creswell (2013), ethics permeate all phases of the research process, from planning to publishing, from consent to the protection of participants’ identity. Informed consent of all the participants was secured before I conducted the interviews. I discussed the purpose of the study and the benefits and risks of participation with each of my participants in person. All interviewees also received a copy of the consent form (See Appendix D), which they were asked to sign. As I described the study, I told my participants that we will be discussing intimate aspects of their relationship, their racial identities, and personal experiences, which might, at times, be uncomfortable. I assured them that they had the right to refuse to answer specific
questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. None of the participants chose to withdraw from the study.

Another consideration I had was around protecting the identities of the participants. Most qualitative studies cannot achieve complete anonymity because of the kind of methods used for data collection, including face-to-face interviews. However, confidentiality can be maintained in other ways during the research process. Following the ethics of interviewing, I asked the participants to choose their own pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. In some cases, I had to change these, when multiple participants chose the same pseudonym for example, or when a participant chose a pseudonym that was an actual name of another participant. There were other cases when I changed a pseudonym, especially if I thought it might compromise a participant’s anonymity. For instance, one of my participants used his nickname as a pseudonym, and I changed it. In another case, a male participant chose the pseudonym (Vivian) used widely by women, which made it harder to read and understand the text, and I decided to change his name from Vivian to Vid. In some cases, instead of providing the participants’ country of origin, I mentioned the geographical region they come from. In the case of a participant who comes from a small Caribbean island, I changed the name of the island to Jamaica. I choose to not mention the occupation of my participants, except in a couple of cases when it was relevant. The personal data of the participants, both the audio and text files, are stored in a password-protected folder.

As mentioned earlier, participants were informed about the possible risks and benefits associated with this study. I did not offer financial compensation to the participants for their time and participation. However, some valued the opportunity to tell their story and to contribute to the production of knowledge about mixed race relationships. I offered to send a short summary of my findings to participants after the completion of the study. All but one of my participants
were interested in receiving it. Most of my interviews were between 1–3 hours, and I met all the participants twice, the first time as a couple and then individually. The participants invested a significant amount of time in the study.

This research project has been approved by Behaviour Research Ethics Board (BREB) of University of British Columbia. It is important to note that BREB guidelines are limited to legal and formal requirements. However, research is a social practice deeply embedded in relations of power. Power dynamics are inherent throughout the research process and require the researcher to be aware of them (Kvale, 2006). It is often assumed that if the researcher defines the terms of engagement, they are in a position of power in relation to the participants (Kvale, 2006), even though such relations of power may be unstable. As Naples (2007) points out, “research subjects have the power to influence the direction of the research, resist researchers’ efforts and interpretations, and add their own interpretations and insights” (p. 551). As I discuss above, my participants shaped my research in important ways, by challenging how we think of race, ethnicity, and “mixed race.”

Other participants also challenged what constitutes a mixed-race relationship. For example, Dan, a Chinese-Canadian man, gave fairly clipped answers to my questions during the couple interview, as he did not see himself as being in a mixed relationship. He is married to Hiromi, a Japanese woman. He believed that since they were both Asians, their relationship was not mixed. But Hiromi disagreed with him and convinced him to meet with me. They fit the mixed couple criteria set out by Statistics Canada, but he did not fully agree with that definition. He expressed his suspicions and his resistance to definitions of their relationship by keeping his answers short. When Dan participated in my individual interview, and as he had a chance to tell his story as a third-generation Chinese Canadian man whose parents were born in Canada, he
became more open. I noticed that the participants adjusted their narratives to what they believed were the expectations of my study. At the same time, they interpreted my study according to their own tacit assumptions and, I would argue, participated on their own terms.

Participants often set the terms of their engagement. For example, some interpreted my questions in ways that allowed them to share their stories. In the individual interviews I asked participants to talk about their racial and cultural identity. Jon, a white Canadian man, insisted on telling me about his experiences of growing up in a lower-middle-class family; he felt it was essential to talk about his class alongside his race to show how the privileges he received as a white man were mitigated by his economic hardships. As the researcher I decided which parts of the participants’ stories to focus on and how to present them in my writing. However, I believe the participants’ voices must guide the research process and this finds expression in my study. For example, Jon mentioned his lower-class background in a conversation when he was interviewed by a me, a woman of colour. My gender and race made him more aware of his gendered and racial privileges as a white man. Archer (2002) suggests that the researcher’s attempt to contextualize the participants’ voice(s) “acknowledge[s] that different voices are produced in different contexts, and that ‘voices’ are produced within racialized, sexualized interactions (p. 128).” I would contend that he chose to discuss his class background to defend himself and redirect the focus of our conversation. In the chapters that follow, I have provided a “thick description” in order to contextualize the participants’ responses.

My own relationship with the participants evolved in different ways. Most of them were not people that I knew personally. Many contacted me after seeing my recruitment note, while a few of them were referred by friends who wanted to help me with my research. One of them is a university colleague, but we had never met socially. I met two of the couples in social gatherings
organized by common friends, and they expressed an interest in participating in the study after I told them about my research. Some of the participants expressed interest in getting to know me socially, which I was open to – provided that they took the initiative. I met a few female participants for coffee after the interview process was over. One participant invited me to a family event, which I could not attend due to a conflict in my schedule. I invited two of the couples to my place for dinner after all the interviews were finished.

Some participants added me as a friend on social media. Once the interviews were over, and in these subsequent interactions, I did not collect any material for research purposes. The conversations we had afterwards were in a different social register. The subject of my research did not come up except in reference to how we met. I believe this social component of my relationship that I developed with the participants did not compromise my role or ethics as a researcher. It may have offered further opportunities to see into the participants’ lives, beyond the format of the interview, but I was not motivated by this. I did not use these meetings as opportunities to collect more data or clarify things with my participants. The participants who chose to connect with me socially did so after the interviews were completed.

2.4 The Interview Process

I decided to conduct interviews to generate data for this study, with the awareness that interviews are not authentic representations of reality but provide subjective versions of reality as told by the participants. As a researcher, I viewed my task as gleaning how reality is constructed and experienced by the participants in my study. It is important to note that there is a tension between the research interview as an instrument to obtain information and the research interview as a social practice (Talmy, 2010).
As a research instrument, interviews are theorized (often tacitly) as a resource for investigating truths, facts, experience, beliefs, attitudes, and/or feelings of respondents. Language tends to be conceptualized in referential terms, as a neutral medium that reflects or corresponds to objective or subjective reality.” (Talmy, 2010, p. 130)

In my experience, interviews are not just instruments for generating data, but interactions that are shaped by their social and discursive contexts and by the relationship between the researcher conducting the interviews and the responses of the interviewees. My interactions with the participants were influenced by how they perceived me and their expectations of what I needed to hear from them.

Foucault (1980, 1991) suggests that forms of knowledge generate certain forms of discourses that place subjects and things in a pre-established field of relations. This process creates a subject who is not prior to discourse but embedded in it. By pointing to the nexus between power and knowledge exemplified through various forms of discourse, Foucault’s intervention raises two questions: How is power implicated in the formation of the subject who can speak? And how, and in what ways, does power constrain the emergent subject’s speech? The interview process is not an exercise in telling the objective truth, which is independent of the constraints placed on the subjects who engage in a dialogue.

I chose semi-structured in-depth interviews as they allowed for a balance between carefully worded, thought-through questions while offering participants the potential to clarify through probing and follow-up questions (See, Appendix E). This format allowed my interviewees to talk freely, and they were able to explore and reflect upon their own responses during our interactions (Bryman, 2012). My interviewing approach is in part guided by Holstein and Gubrium’s (1995) notion of active interviewing, where the interview is structured as a conversation guided by the research interest of the interviewee, but the focus is on cultivating the respondent’s narrative activity. I wanted to grasp how people present themselves and narrate the
stories of their lives. I was interested in generating talk where participants could retrospectively articulate their descriptions of their lived experiences as well as their interpretation of their felt experiences in terms of the emotions these activated. The semi-structured interview format was particularly useful in the couple interviews, where the interviews unfolded in the form of a conversation between the participants and me.

The interviews were recorded. I also took field notes to document non-verbal cues like the demeanour of the participants, and a description of the general environment of the meeting. My field notes focused on the process of interaction, the interaction sequences, and my own impressions as the interviewer (Emerson et al., 1995). Wherever possible, and drawing on Weiss’s (1994) guideline for interviews, I worded my questions in a way that asked for concrete descriptions of events. I also probed the responses of my interviewees to ask about their internal feelings.

### 2.5 Individual and Couple Interviews

As mentioned earlier, I chose to interview the participating couples together and separately. This ensured that I met the respondents at multiple times to allow more time to develop rapport and to afford opportunities to ask for clarifications or to pose follow-up questions. I conducted three interviews with each couple: one interview with the couple together and one interview with each partner. I met the couples together for the first interview and then met the partners separately for the following interviews. I preferred this sequence because in the first interview I described the project, established a rapport with both the participants and gave them the opportunity to present themselves to me as a unit. Valentine (1999) claims that asking couples for separate interviews can produce anxiety since they are worried about coming across as an un-matched couple. Meeting them together the first time helped to address this problem by making the couple more
comfortable. Individual interviews are the norm in research, but I believe couple interviews were very important for my study because I got the opportunity to establish better rapport with the participants and earn their trust, which is paramount in a study focused on personal aspects of their life. In this section I discuss couple interviews and the challenges they can pose for a researcher.

Volteelen et al. (2017) discuss how couple interviews pose the question of individual anonymity since the couple, when interviewed together, tends to provide a shared account. In my study, I made sure the participants understood this. I interviewed individuals together and again separately to provide reflective space for them to unreservedly communicate their views and experiences. In one case where an individual interviewee expressed regret for continuing in their relationship, I decided to anonymize the participant so their partner would not be able to identify them if they read the passage, even though this was not requested by the participant. I have not connected that quote with the specific participant in my writing.

Mellor et al. (2013) suggest that when a researcher approaches a couple together for an interview, one partner may often play the role of “gatekeeper.” The gatekeeper obtains information about the study and convinces their partner to join in, leading to a situation of “co-construction of consent” (Mellor et al., 2013, p. 1402), even though the partners were interviewed separately. During the recruitment process for my study, one partner received information about the research and shared it with their partner. Often it was the case that this partner was more interested in being a part of the study. In the case of the heterosexual couples participating in this study, the female partners were more interested in participating and motivated their male partners to participate. I started with a couple interview where both partners had a chance to discuss the study and their participation with me and also with each other. Both
were made aware that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. The joint interviews I did were followed by individual interviews to provide partners with more space to discuss their individual responses to my questions and to express any concerns they had with the interview process.

Some participants were less enthusiastic than their partners about participation, yet no one declined to participate. Dan, a Chinese-Canadian man, married to Hiromi, a Japanese woman, who I introduced earlier, told me that he was unsure about participating in the study. He was encouraged to participate by his wife who had seen a recruitment call for my study in a café and convinced him to come along. However, as I mentioned above, his skepticism was related to his belief that they were not a mixed couple as they were both Asians. In Dan’s opinion, they came from an Asian background, and he considered their background to be only “slightly different.” However, Hiromi felt that they were very different. Dan was willing to participate in order to support his wife. Even when I told him that they would be considered a mixed couple under the definition offered by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2014), he was skeptical about how relevant their participation would be from a research point of view. Dan answered my questions during the interview, but he was not as enthusiastic as Hiromi.

“Asian” as an umbrella category has been used to lump together different national-origin groups in the American context to make it easier for the state to relate to them (Drouhot & Garip, 2021). This underlines a tendency to ignore the diversity between the groups contained in the Asian category leading to a form of epistemic essentialization and reification erasing unique histories, cultures, agency, and subjective experiences of race and discrimination (Drouhot & Garip, 2021). Dan, a third generation Canadian who was raised by Canada-born Chinese parents, may have accepted the idea of Asian as a pan-national category because of its prevalence in the
Canadian context. Hiromi, on the other hand, migrated from Japan as an adult and retains a strong sense of national and cultural identity. Dan explained that people did not see him and Hiromi as a mixed couple and considered them to be an Asian couple. While Dan does not appear to have a problem with it, Hiromi felt it made them invisible, and others failed to notice the differences between them.

I conducted interviews in the participants’ place of convenience. I offered to conduct interviews at my UBC office, but most of the participants preferred to meet in their own homes/offices or in coffee shops in different parts of Greater Vancouver. One participant met me in the lobby of a shopping mall. The interviews were all conducted between 2016 and 2017. The venue was often not the same for the two interviews and was decided according to the participants’ preference. All the interviews were conducted in person. I often listened to the recording of the couple interview before commencing individual interviews, as this provided me an opportunity to clarify and probe their respective responses. In most cases, and where appropriate, I offered a beverage to my participants to thank them for their time. In many instances participants offered me food, especially when I visited them in their homes. This speaks to the sociality of the interview as an interactive process. These social exchanges definitely helped me to build a better rapport with the participants, both individually and together.

When interviewing a couple, the dynamics of joint decision making are bound to impact the recruitment process. Consent and participation can be deemed as co-constructed. Dyadic interviewing recognizes the significance of human interconnection and instead of avoiding, it embraces its value to research by turning the dyad (couple) itself into a unit of analysis (Allan, 1980; Caldwell, 2014). Further, joint interviews can add context and depth to the interview
A joint interview is a useful tool for data collection and suitable for certain forms of studies and themes for research. Traditionally, individual interviews have been the preferred way of collecting data through the interview method, often based on an individualist idea of an authentic self (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012). I consider the self to be a relational entity and people’s accounts to be narratives in a context instead of authentic truths. Following Morris (2001), I focused on talk generated in the interview process “as a communicative act rather than a representation of the real inner world” (p. 556). Thus, I see value in recognizing an interview to be a “multivocal occasion” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

I decided to do couple interviews because I see this as well suited to a study focusing on mixed couples and their experiences and identity. Reflecting on the joint and individual interviews I conducted, I would agree with Arskey (1996) that it is pointless to say which mode of interviewing is better, but to accept that they both generate different kinds of data. In the joint (first) interview, my questions focused on the general history of the relationship, the meanings they attach to being a mixed couple and how they performed that cultural identity, by learning each other’s languages and incorporating cultural traditions in their daily life. I also asked them about the social opposition they may have faced as a mixed couple, such as disapproval from their families and friends and the strategies they used to deal with it. I asked questions about their wedding if they are married, or their ideas about a wedding, and if they had thought about their own. The literature shows that ideologies of heterosexual marriage regulate the role played by class, gender, and race in the dynamics of couples’ interactions, and weddings become important events where cultural values and differences are expressed (Fetner & Heath, 2015; Ingraham,
Many of the couples in my study had used their weddings to showcase their different cultural heritage.

In the individual interviews, I asked more questions about the meanings partners attached to their racial identity, and romantic history, whether they had previous interracial relationships and how they experienced them, their views on race relations in Canadian society, personal experiences with racism, and how they think their partner’s family and friends have treated them. I also asked them about their broader opinions on racism. At the time of the individual interview, I also asked the participants to fill out a short questionnaire with demographic information, including particulars like their age, residential status in Canada, education, employment, number of years they had been together, and their family and personal incomes to note their characteristics.

A number of previous empirical studies focusing on interracial couples have also used joint interviews (Childs, 2005; Nemoto, 2009). Joint interviews provide insights into how participants presented themselves as a couple and displayed their mixedness. Drawing on Finch’s (2007) concept of family display, I argue that couples act in ways that would confirm their couplehood to an external audience or the interviewer, and such performance is useful in gaining insight into what is deemed legitimate expressions of couplehood. Couples engage in a kind of shared performance where knowledge is co-constructed as they interact with the researcher (Allen, 1984; Polak & Green, 2016; Taylor & de Vocht, 2011). Couple interviews are a form of shared storytelling and sites for observing the scripting practices that shape the stories of their relationships:

how partnerships are linked to relational discourse at a cultural level (cultural scripts), involve socially shaped relating orientations and practices (personal scripts) that people bring to their relationships, and how couple stories and practices (couple scripts) emerge through interaction in relationships. (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013, p. 54)
In my interviews, the participating couples followed cultural, personal, and couple scripts when they narrated their stories to me. They talked about the dominating tropes about love and romance, their own approach to relationships as well as how they worked as a couple in terms of their identity and everyday practices. However, partners often disagreed with each other on matters of fact and how they interpreted them. These points of tension offered insights on the dynamics of their relationship and often provided me with questions and points of focus for the individual interviews.

In her study of Black and white couples, Childs (2005) preferred interviewing couples together to grasp how they constructed their self-identity as an interracial couple. Since I examined how mixed couple identity is formed and performed within intimate relations, I decided to interview couples together as well. However, unlike Childs (2005), I felt that it could be advantageous to interview partners separately as well. Previous studies on interracial couples have reported that individuals may often be hesitant to answer certain questions in the presence of their partner (Nemoto, 2009; Schueths, 2013). I observed this in certain instances with my participants, where individuals were more likely to discuss conflictual issues in the individual interview. For example, one of the participants in my study, a woman of colour married to a white man with children, admitted that she may have chosen a different partner if she had the same amount of racial consciousness and confidence in herself as she does now. She described her desire to “fit in” by choosing a white partner. I noticed that partners were more articulate about their opinions on racism in their individual interviews than when they met me as a couple, especially partners who were people of colour. For instance, Sheila, a Chinese Canadian woman married to Earl, a white American man, in the individual interview disputed his description of
her first meeting with his grandfather. When I spoke to them together, Earl had described the
encounter in vivid terms as follows:

My grandfather took a look at her, and he held out his hand and she took his hand and he
swung her around and sat her on his lap where she sat for the next 20 minutes talking to
my grandfather, and I’m there with the rest of the family going, “Yes! … For me, it was
instant acceptance by the family that I was close to and so I ceased to worry about whether
or not they would have objections about marrying somebody not WASP.

Sheila did not question his account during the couple interview. In the individual interview she
admitted that his grandfather accepted her into the family. However, she felt that his behaviour
of swinging her around and seating her on his lap was patronizing, and that he would not have
behaved this way if she were not a petite Asian woman.

Participants were able to speak more freely in the individual interviews. This could be a
result of various factors. They might have felt more open without their partners, or they might
have been forthcoming because they knew me better and felt more comfortable in my presence.
In Chad’s case, he was nervous in the second interview because he was worried that he would
say something that would portray him as racist. In this case I believe his anxiety also stemmed
from losing the security of his partner, which underlines the value of meeting them together in
the first interview. My general impression is that the joint interview also contributed to building
a sense of comfort and trust between me and the participants. For instance, one of the couples,
May, a Taiwanese woman and her partner Emma, a white transwoman, were excited to know
they would be answering the same questions and they looked forward to doing it “as a team.”
The individual interviews gave space to the participants to speak more freely and even articulate
views they may not be comfortable discussing in front of their partner, as the case of Sheila
suggests.
I coded the interactions between couples and noticed that partners constantly spoke to each other when I interviewed them together. Participants in a joint interview can help to jog each other’s memories by filling in the gaps and expanding what is said, often contributing towards a more complete account (Morris, 2001; Valentine, 1999). My participants constantly corrected each other’s statements, ranging from simple facts, such as wedding dates, to facts that were more significant, like who asked who out first or how they came to live in a certain city or neighbourhood. The interview process was affected by these subtle influences of the context of interaction and the dialogic nature of conversational practices (Frank, 2012). Interviewing a couple together can highlight the interactive and relational aspects of experience (Sakellariou et al., 2013). It appeared at times that partners were surprised by each other’s responses and learnt new things during the interview. For instance, Sandy, a white Canadian woman, married to Tamara, a Black Caribbean-Canadian woman, learnt during the interview that her wife’s colleagues assumed she was Black. Sandy reacted with surprise. At times partners used the interview situation to call each other out. Jon, a white American man, called out his husband Max, a Middle Eastern man, on his anti-American views. Jon agreed with Max’s political opinions about U.S. policies, but they claimed that he was prejudiced against Americans.

In her study on Asian and white couples in the United States, Nemoto (2009) explains that interviewing couples together allowed her to infer the power dynamics at play in the couple’s relationship. She carefully observed how they interacted with each other and who dominated the conversation. The couple interviews afforded me a key opportunity to pay close attention to the dynamics between the couple as they interacted. If participants disagreed on some of the facts, usually one of them convinced the other that their recollection was correct, or they managed to move on by tacitly agreeing about multiple versions of the truth. Sometimes
they agreed to disagree or used humour to diffuse a potentially challenging situation. For example, Amber, a white Canadian woman, and her partner Roq, a Black Fijian woman, did not agree on how they met. They explained that there were two versions and proceeded to tell me both. Similarly, May, an Asian Taiwanese woman, and Emma, a white Canadian woman, who are partners, did not agree with each other on how they got together. But in their respective opinion the differences had more to do with the length of the story. Emma admitted to being brief and forgetful, while May was more thorough. The matter here was that Emma and May had briefly broken up in the start of the relationship and Emma didn’t go into it and May did. Emma later referred to this as “the gory details.”

At times disagreements between a couple could lead to serious arguments. For example, Mark and Meera, a white British-Canadian and a South Asian British Canadian heterosexual couple, while discussing the difficulties they faced regarding the sale of their previous home disagreed about the role of race. They did not agree as to whether the problems they encountered had to do with Meera’s identity as a woman of colour. Such conflicts enabled me to gaze deeper into the relationships of the couples and to consider how race and racism shaped their interactions. Often I felt that the participants were aware that this was an interview, and I was trying to glean information. Some felt they needed to help me by offering additional explanations, even when questions were directed at their partner. Sometimes partners questioned each other or asked for elaborations even before I followed up. At one point, one of the participants, Roq, asked her partner Amber to talk instead of gesturing so it could be caught on the recorder: Roq interrupted Amber by saying “I don’t think it [the recorder] can hear your gestures.”
Such interruptions provided me with additional data, insights, and opportunities to ask probing questions. For instance, when I interviewed Dina, a white Australian woman married to Henry, a Black American man, I noticed that Henry often paraphrased my questions as if he were not satisfied with Dina’s response or wanted her to reflect further on certain points. For instance, when I asked Dina about her family and their conception of an ideal partner for her, she avoided the question by talking about how they treated her husband, and previous partners who people of colour were also, but did not actually tell me what they would think as ideal. Henry probed her further:

Henry: Did they have an idea or conception of who you would be with, do you think that in any way connected to the way they would look?

Dina: Like I said, like I had boyfriends from India, from Cambodia, and they were kind of like okay, and so I don’t think that they are surprised, you know, that I’ve chosen to partner with someone from a different background to myself.

Henry: But that’s again different, I think at least. The nuance of that difference is what is your parents’ ideal conception of who they would want to see you with and whether or not they are surprised you’re dating someone, is a different question.

In this conversation, Henry did not accept Dina’s answer to my question. Instead, he rephrased the question as a way to encourage Dina to reflect upon her parents’ willingness to accept him as her husband, which he claimed was different from their expectations of who would be an ideal match for her.

As a race-conscious Black man, Henry was unwilling to accept Dina’s answer that her parents would accept her choices, or that race was irrelevant to their considerations of who might be an ideal partner for her. Eventually Henry’s probing questions shifted the conversation to a discussion of white privilege, which he claimed allows white people to downplay the significance of race and appear progressive. He wanted to use the interview to push Dina into reflecting upon the continuing relevance of her own racial privilege as a white woman. Despite
her progressive racial awareness, Henry’s questions created a tense situation and I found myself playing the role of mediator, moderating the conversation and making sure everyone was comfortable. Thus, my interview became a site for them to articulate potentially difficult race-related conversations and disagreements.

In context of the couple interviews, I often found myself juggling different roles. I was the interviewer asking questions and eliciting information, but often enough I found myself mediating arguments, ensuring that the conversation was not dominated by a single partner and creating space for both of them to voice their opinions. I found myself trying to establish my neutrality. In the course of the interviews, the participants and I shared emotional moments where I took on the role of the sympathetic listener, and at times I also found myself on the verge of giving advice. This happened a few times, for example when Rajesh and Maxine shared with me the difficulties they were facing with getting his Indian family to accept their relationship. At this point, I began to offer suggestions about how they could navigate such expectations. In such situations I checked myself because I felt it was not my place to offer counsel.

2.6 Participants’ Reflections on the Interview Process

Since I interviewed all of my participants twice, I had the opportunity to ask them to reflect on the first interview they had with me and to discuss their impressions. I invited them to reflect on how they felt about the first interview. Often this led my participants to think about the interview process in general and their expectations of it. Most of them described their general impressions and takeaways from the first interview, but some of them also discussed concerns they had about their partners’ responses. These reflections are valuable as they provide an opportunity for the participants, especially people of colour, to reverse the gaze, register their own voice in the research process, and actively evaluate the interview and me.
Many of my participants viewed my position as the interviewer to be similar to a witness or an interlocutor who was taking notes on their relationship. Ralph, a white British man, engaged to Katy, a Chinese-Canadian woman, discussed my presence as the interviewer as a witness to their story:

I suppose the only difference was that you were yourself there, we were kind of introducing it to you, and we had gone over a lot of our history because we applied for our permanent residence application, so a lot of this stuff was already fresh in our mind … it was just kind of nice to have a conversation with somebody else, actually, a third party who is interested to learn about your dynamic and that kind of thing.

Like Ralph, many other participants viewed their involvement in the interview as a meaningful experience. A few participants talked about the interview with their friends and family. Two mixed-race participants told their parents, who were also in mixed relationships, about their experience and talked about comparing notes with them. However, Chad, a white Canadian whom I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, was nervous in his individual interview. When I asked him about it, he told me that he had discussed the interview with a friend, who had warned him about coming across as racist. Chad said, “I was talking to my friend, and he said there were no right answers, but there could be wrong answers.” I tried to tell him that there were no wrong answers, and I was interested in his experience. He was reassured once I told him that I was married to a white man. During my first interview with them, when they asked me about my interest in the subject, I had disclosed to Chad and his partner that I was also in a mixed relationship. Chad asked me if my husband was Caucasian, and I told him he was white.

Some of the participants felt that talking about their experiences was a way of dispelling the myths people have about the experiences of mixed couples. Gina, a white Canadian woman, said:
I’m sure that it’s a lot milder than what some people’s families deal with. Given that both of the families that we come from sort of pride themselves on being progressive and accepting and all that kind of things [short pause] that’s also important for you to – like it’s not always going to be problematic and it’s a good thing for it shows that we have a place, that we are as a society in terms of accepting interracial couples is not as bad as it used to be.

Gina felt that she and her husband may not be representative of a broad experience of mixed couples because they did not face explicit opposition from their families, but that their experience was important to counter stereotypical expectations about mixed couples facing social opposition and struggling.

Some participants appreciated what they learnt from participating in the interview. For instance, Maxine, a white woman partnered with Rajesh, an Indian man, told me that she was surprised to learn that her partner was concerned about their future children and about their potential inability to relate to him culturally. She was keen to make sure his concerns were addressed, and thought it was great she came to know this through the interview process. For Meera, a British woman of South Asian descent, knowing that her husband Mark, a white man, avoided having conversations about race with her, was not a pleasant realization. Meera explained, “I guess that was just one thing that was said that was much, much surprising, just, it reinforces what I already knew, which just made me sad.”

At the time of the interview, Mark and Meera had been married for over two decades and had raised three children together. Meera was aware of Mark’s views, but she had not confronted them directly until the couple did their interview with me. She was upset about his response. At that moment I found myself in an unexpected and uneasy position, and I felt I had to comfort Meera. I did this by showing her my understanding and support, and by highlighting that Mark’s response was complicated. Mark was reluctant to talk about race because he knew his opinions
on the subject were potentially confrontational and he wanted to avoid conflict. Meera is knowledgeable about issues of race and racism and was able to critically engage with her husband’s responses. She continued the conversation and offered insights on why he may have reacted this way, which was helpful in building my own formulations of their interviews and their relationship.

Some of my participants were able to use the interview as a site to think about how they could give space to one another in their relationship. Some white partners mentioned that they were worried about talking over their partners’ responses and were glad their partners took space. For example, Amber told me that she was glad that her partner Roq played an active part in the conversation, as she was the quieter of the two of them. Amber said:

She’s quieter in new situations, and as I said in the interview, I was the talker, so that made me happy that she really jumped into it, because it felt like there is space created for her to say what she wanted to say, that it was an important topic.

Similarly, Chrystal, a white woman who is partnered with Ronald, a mixed-race man, also discussed her experience along similar terms:

Whenever Ronald and I are together, I try not to talk over him because he, I think, is more introverted than I am, so he takes some time to process, so I am always thinking about, “Did I give him enough time to speak? Or was I overbearing?” So that was something that I thought about too internally and also because he is the person in our relationship who is a minority and so I don’t want to take his space to talk about those things, it’s not – I have ideas and thoughts, but in terms of racial difference, but his opinion is more important than mine.

Based on Chrystal’s response, I would infer that she was conscious about the importance of giving her partner the space to speak. This is doubly significant since she worked in higher education and due to her training at work, she had learnt to use the vocabulary to discuss race in conceptual and academic terms, but she made an effort to keep it in check so her partner Ronald
could speak from his own experiences. At the same time, she seemed to be aware of her white privilege and the place of dominance she occupies in the racial hierarchy.

Overall, I think my participants had different takeaways from the interview process as they engaged with my questions and offered sincere discussions and reflections. In quantitative research there are several techniques for ensuring the validity and reliability of the data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). But because of the nature of qualitative data, this approach is not very useful in ensuring its credibility. The credibility of data in qualitative research, especially data based on interviews, depends on the ability of the researcher to elicit reliable responses from the participants. I believe my participants were considerate and their responses were earnest, even if they were clearly affected by the various factors that mediate the research process, such as an interviewer’s identity (Vasquez-Tokos, 2017), interviewee’s memory (Gemignani, 2014), and the site of research (Ecker, 2017), among others. Vaisey (2009) has criticized interviews for failing to tap into unconscious and intuitive meanings, while relying largely on what is consciously and discursively articulated. Researchers should try to engage with implicit reasoning and unconscious reasoning. As a sociologist I am invested in understanding how individuals make sense of their world and attribute meanings to it, thus what people say is equally worthy of sociological inquiry. In addition, paying attention to non-verbal cues, interruptions of speech, subtle omissions, etc. can also give access to knowledge beyond what is explicitly stated.

2.7 Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews I conducted were audio recorded (with permission) and transcribed verbatim. The transcription was split between myself, a transcription company called No-notes, NVivo transcription service that used speech recognition software, and a few graduate
students that I recruited. This was a time-consuming process, as the interviews were long and I divided my time between transcription, coding and writing in a non-linear way. Whenever someone other than me did the transcription work, they signed a non-disclosure agreement to maintain confidentiality. I read through the transcription notes and checked them against the audio recordings for accuracy. Furthermore, I took note of certain aspects of the interview that are not captured in verbatim transcripts, but articulated through pauses, hesitations, nervous laughter, silences, crosstalk, etc.

I analyzed the interview data by coding it, using the program NVivo. The process of coding involved a combination of inductive and deductive codes known as retroductive coding (Ragin, 1994). Some of my codes were deductive emerging from theory, for example, racial literacy, while others were inductive and based on the empirical data, for example, legitimizing effect of whiteness. The first round of coding was open and involved multiple readings of the transcripts. I constructed a codebook of over a hundred codes, including, “racial identity,” “experiences of racism,” “multiculturalism,” “language learning,” etc. Later, I merged and reorganized some of these codes into larger themes. For instance, I included different discussions on Canada, including Canadian culture, identity, history, into “being Canadian.” The process involved reading the data, constructing codes, and identifying larger, overarching code families, which could be connected with the literature (Grbich, 2013). The analysis process was iterative, involving constant revision based on findings generated from the data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The inductive codes were refined, merged, and reformulated. The deductive codes were based on expectations based on previous studies. For instance, I expected couples to pursue activities to incorporate cultural traditions from their partners’ background in their lives, which can be captured by the theoretical concept of cultural affiliation developed by Yodanis et al.
(2012) and Jiménez (2010), and parts of the interview describing this process were coded as such. I also took notes during the interview, which contributed to the process of analysis. For example, one of my interviews was conducted in a Chinese restaurant, and the participants were a couple, Earl, a white American man, and Sheila, a Chinese-Canadian woman. I noticed that Sheila read the menu in English and Earl used the Chinese menu. When I asked, I found out that while Sheila spoke Cantonese, she could not read it. Earl, on the other hand, could read Mandarin since he had studied it in China. Earl joked about how he was always handed an English menu in Chinese restaurants while Sheila was given a menu in Mandarin, and they always exchanged them. This provided an opportunity to talk about cultural affiliation and exchange and its role in shaping their marriage.

I used thematic narrative analysis method to draw out some unifying themes that emerged from the data. I read the data as the stories my participants told me about their lives, and I focused on a few intact pieces embedded within the overall narrative (Riessman, 2008), for example how the couples told the story of their relationship or how they became a couple. I focused on the cultural meaning-making in my participants’ stories. In addition, I examined the structural elements used in people’s narratives, focusing on how they organized their narratives. I paid close attention to the couples’ use of metaphors, time, dialogic interactions, inflections in speech, and silences in these narratives because these reflected the couples’ unarticulated knowledge, and anchored intuitive and emotional reactions (Vaisey, 2009; Riessman, 2008; DiMaggio, 1997). Focusing on the structural elements of people’s speech helped me to address the limits of what was said by the participants, by drawing on how they said it.

Metaphors are not just linguistic expressions, but cognitive devices. Some of my participants used therapy as a metaphor to describe the couple interview. According to them, the
interview process felt like therapy because they were able to talk about their experiences together with a third person, me as the interviewer. A number of participants described their interview using a therapy metaphor. Dina, a white Australian woman whom I introduced earlier in this chapter, said: “We do talk about this stuff quite a lot. But it’s an interesting topic for us and so it was nice to have someone to talk to about, I guess, yes. It’s like free therapy or something.”

Nina, a South Asian woman of Indian descent married to a white American man, remarked, “It was cool to like talk about each other a little bit and it was almost therapeutic.” Her husband Jim agreed saying he found “therapeutic value in this for our own relationship, which I wasn’t expecting.” Anita, a white Canadian woman, also viewed the interview as “therapeutic”:

It was really interesting to talk in depth about relationship and issues or reflections on culture without being in the context of relationship counseling. Kris and I had not done relationship counselling, but that’s a common situation where you would talk so deeply about yourself and your history to someone you don’t know well. So, I thought it was really interesting to do that without the filter of, “Oh, this is how we’re trying to solve a problem, and this is where we’re coming from.”

The role of the interviewer as an external audience can lead the couple to offer their story as a meaningful transaction, where the interviewer took on the role of a non-biased listener to the couple’s story (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). For Nina and Jim, the interview process and my presence as the interviewer allowed them to look back at their relationship and make a case for why they have chosen to be with each other. Nina, explained, “It was kind of nice to reflect on our relationship and the fact that we had to talk about it, like, from the beginning, like, remember the things that happened. It made us remember that we are in this together for a reason.” Couples’ therapy generally signifies working through challenges a couple may face in a relationship, and I would infer that using this metaphor for the interview could mean that the participants felt their mixedness was a challenging aspect of their relationship. This is a noteworthy insight on how
participants viewed mixedness. Metaphorical use of language can shed light on elusive cognitive processes of thinking, and as metaphors are culturally situated, they are useful to grasp cultural ideologies (Lakoff, 1993).

I was interested in the language used by the participants to examine the social phenomenon of interracial intimacy. I was interested in the linguistic elements that Bonilla-Silva (2006) calls stylistic components of speech in his discursive analysis of expressions of colour-blind racism. He describes how colour-blind racism creates a context in which people employ semantic moves, like apparent denials, ambiguous claims, diminutives to minimize damage, claiming to be ignorant, and avoidance of direct racial language to express their racial views. For instance, “discursive buffers” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 57) like “if” and “but” are used by people to save face to avoid coming across as racist and being called out. I focused on patterns of expression and representation, as well as the omissions and silences in people’s speech (Dorow, 2006).

For example, in a discussion on racism, Mark, a white heterosexual man, described how he was racially discriminated against and called “a white bastard” by a car driver, while crossing the road in Boston. When I asked him to describe the aggressor, he said, “I think he was mixed Hispanic–Black. He was quite dark skinned, but he wasn’t – full American.” The description of a person of colour, the car driver, as not “full American” also showed Mark’s biases, that he considered an American to look white. This was not what he explicitly said, but it could be interpreted from his remarks. What is missing from his comments are the implicit assumptions about who is an American, and what an American looks like, what race Americans belong to. Fairclough (2003) has remarked on the salience of implicit assumptions in text: “What is ‘said’ in a text is ‘said’ against a background of what is ‘unsaid’ but taken as given” (p. 40).
2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the process of data collection and analysis for my study and the epistemological assumptions I made as I studied my participants’ accounts of their lives, as they conveyed them to me in a social and discursive context. Rather than searching for an authentic truth, I examine how my participants made sense of their lived experiences and identities, as mixed couples in the seemingly progressive context of contemporary Canada. I have described how this research was conducted, including the steps I took as a researcher and the thinking that guided my choices. While I acknowledge that the relationship between the researcher and the respondents is inherently a relation of power, I have shared my participants’ reflections on the research process to offer space for their voices, even if they are constrained by the discursive context of the interview. As a researcher I reflect on my own position and what implications it has on this process. I have tried to explain the assumptions that ground the research process explicit and acknowledge the limits of it.
Chapter 3: Multiple Meanings of Mixedness – Making Sense of Mixed Couple Identity

Gina: I would say if to be like totally honest, in terms of the benefits, it feels like there is a little bit of sort of like – well, we have this – we have this cred, like this like we’re multicultural. We’re like – we’re a couple that has experienced certain barriers, mostly the immigration shit that other couples haven’t faced. We put up with it a lot more obstacles in our relationships to be together than most people do. I think that’s sort of a source of pride for us.

This vignette is a quote from an interview with Gina, a white Canadian woman married to a Mexican man, where she narrates her experience of being in a mixed relationship and what this means for her identity, individually and with her partner. In this chapter I focus on how the participants I interviewed describe their experiences of being a mixed couple, what meanings they attach to their experience, and how they consider the significance of their mixedness to their everyday experience as a couple. I am also interested in how the couples I interviewed think others perceive them as a mixed couple in different social contexts, and how they navigate these reactions. These different themes are evident in the opening vignette, as Gina reflects on how being in a mixed relationship has affected her life. Although Gina is well aware of the challenges she and her partner have faced in their relationship, she emphasizes the positive aspects of this experience. She claims, “We put up with it a lot more obstacles in our relationships to be together than most people do. I think that’s sort of a source of pride for us.” Gina’s reflections are also evident in how other couples in my study understood their experience. They faced certain challenges including negative attention, lack of acceptance from family and friends, and different forms of stereotyping, but many of them believed that this made them more resilient. In addition, many of the couples were aware of the positive attention and admiration they received.
for being symbols of multiculturalism and progress. As Gina says, “We have this cred, like we are multicultural.”

In this chapter I investigate how mixed couples narrated their identity and experiences. First, I discuss the idea of “mixedness” itself and how it relates to the couples I interviewed. Next, I focus on the meaning of being mixed, as an official term and how the couples in this study related to it. Specifically, I examine how mixed couples were read as exceptional in relation to couples who are not mixed. The narratives of my participants will both elaborate and complicate the idea of racial mixedness and how we understand race as a visible marker of identity and difference.

3.1 Understanding Mixedness and Difference: Meanings and Markers

My study focuses on racial intermixture. Although couples belonging to different ethnic and religious categories can also identify as mixed and may encounter social opposition similar to interracial couples, legal and social sanctions imposed on interracial couples mark their experiences with a specific historical and social significance. In the context of intimacy, racial lines have been harder to cross than ethnic lines because interracial couples have faced broader and systematic legal and social sanctions in different historical contexts (Waters, 1990).

According to Kennedy (2004), anti-miscegenation laws in the United States demonstrated that while “social pressures have been widely brought to bear to discourage interethnic marriage, state power was mobilized only when authorities feared that people might marry across the colour line” (p. 220, italics in the original). Although these laws have long been repealed, the social sanctions against interracial marriages have not disappeared (Childs, 2005). Discussing the prevalence of intermarriage in Western societies, Song (2009) states that
Even though intermarriage can entail the transcending of racial, ethnic and religious boundaries, the often immediate visible recognition of phenotypical differences between partners, though subjective, makes interracial marriage a social phenomenon which often arouses societal interest, hostility, and curiosity, especially given the historical and current obsession with “mixing” and the offspring of such ‘mixed’ unions in Western, multi-ethnic societies. (p. 337)

There has been a longstanding debate over whether race can be subsumed under the larger banner of ethnicity or whether it should be a separate concept. The two concepts are often used together and interchangeably because of their conceptual proximity. Race and ethnicity are closely related but different analytical categories, although they may overlap in empirical contexts (Waters, 1990; Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Cornell and Hartmann (1998) claim that ethnocentrism is less virulent than racism; the former views the other as different while the latter views the other as inferior. Race is more strongly marked by an assignment by others, while ethnicity is predominantly marked by self-assertion to create a sense of distinction from others and to produce a commonality within a group. Omi and Winant (1994) assert that the tendency to see race as a part of ethnicity ignores the experience of racial minorities with racial exclusion, slavery, and colonialism. When race is subsumed under ethnicity, the responsibility for racial exclusion is placed on the racialized group, and not on the racializing social structure. Bonilla-Silva (1999) claims that race and ethnicity are similar but have different social effects. He writes, “they are produced by different histories. Races and racisms (ideologies accompanying racial structurations) are historically linked to the history and consequences of colonial encounters; ethnicity is connected to the history of nation-state formation” (Bonilla-Silva, 1999, p. 902). Bonilla-Silva claims that ethnicity is more malleable than race, which is externally assigned and does not offer much scope for self-definition. In his
view, race is more about what you are (phenotype), while ethnicity is more about where you are from (place).

Waters (1990) argues that ethnic options are not available to non-whites for whom race and racial inequality have significant material consequences. Thus, it is dangerous to equate race with ethnicity. Cornell and Hartmann (1998) opine, “ethnic distinctions within racial categories have tended to be overshadowed by the racial designation” (p. 25). In my study too, participants of colour talked about how their race often trumped their ethnicity in terms of nationality and language in terms of how they were perceived and classified by others.

The idea of mixedness is complex when one focuses on interracial partnerships, as it assumes that two races are discrete objects that come together. However, when the conversation is about socially constructed categories like race, it is difficult to define boundaries. Telles and Sue (2009) argue that racial intermixture is based on the idea that races exist as discrete groups with fixed boundaries. Intermarriage is understood to happen when these boundaries are crossed and, thus gives the impression that these racial boundaries are real, even though race is socially constructed. Mahtani (2014) points out that the idea of mixed couples is based on the notion of discrete races, which highlights mixedness between the couple, but often does not consider mixedness within an individual, even though an increasing number of people in Canada identify as mixed race. Although races are not pure objects, racial boundaries that have a social and symbolic significance are in place (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), and they affect real-life experiences of couples who are marked as mixed. Dalmage (2000) has used the concept of “borderism” to focus on how racial identity and identification are created and maintained. How the idea of mixedness in the context of interracial intimacy relating to the articulation and negotiation of racial borders is significant for understanding this process. Some racial boundaries
can be easier to cross than others. For instance, in the United States, the white–Black boundary is the most difficult one to cross (Childs, 2005). These complexities of racial classification and identification make it important to study mixed unions to shed light on the social processes and racial hierarchies that affect individuals involved in these relationships.

Meintel (2002) argues that the idea of mixedness, and how it is constituted, perceived, and experienced shifts in different social and national contexts. In the Canadian context, as I discussed in the introduction, the term “mixed union” is an official category defined and used by Statistics Canada since 1991. It refers to “a couple in which one spouse or partner belongs to a visible minority group and the other is white, as well as a couple in which the two partners belong to different visible minority groups” (Statistics Canada, 2014, p. 3). The term “visible minority” is based on a colour-coded construction of race via skin and phenotype. This is based on the premise that difference is recognized through visibility. The phrase creates a binary of visible and invisible, privileging knowing the world through the sensory act of seeing, while diminishing other forms of knowing and being.

However, race is significant in visual as well as non-visual registers. For instance, Kennedy (2004) describes the possibility of Blacks passing as whites aurally by employing certain linguistic cues. Since race is a dynamic force based on names, accents, and objects, giving primacy to colour and skin over these other markers has been contested. For example, Muslims, especially after 9/11, have been increasingly racialized due to their culture and religion (Razack, 2008). Scholars have argued that in a European context, the rigidity of the Muslim and non-Muslim boundary is similar to the Black and white boundary in the North American context (Rodríguez-García, 2015; Song, 2009). In certain contexts, culture and religion can be as significant as skin colour.
One of my participants, Argon, who is a second-generation Indian Canadian woman married to a white American man, Sneed, mentioned that her parents were willing to accept Sneed as her spouse because he was a white man, and they were used to interacting with people from the dominant culture. She believed that if she had chosen to marry a Muslim South-Asian man, they may have faced greater opposition from her family even though they would have shared many similarities. Argon’s statement highlights that various forms of difference can be racialized in particular ways, depending on the context. She also mentioned that her husband’s family and people in general accepted her more easily because she was a “very Westernized Indian female.” Argon believed that people’s reaction to her could have been different if she were a Muslim woman wearing a hijab. She explained:

I am a very Westernized Indian Female. I don’t wear – I don’t present out apart from my skin, I don’t present as different or other, really. While the colour of my skin is something that is visible and people, they react to it, but in this city it is not unusual sight. But a female wearing a burka in this city is still a very unusual sight.

Argon’s explanation underlines how race and racialization can operate in different ways to include and exclude people depending on the context. She asserted that her racial difference in terms of her skin colour was more acceptable in Vancouver than a hijab, as a religious marker. Certain forms of diversity are more acceptable than others in a multicultural context. Multiculturalism supports a system of exclusion through selective inclusion of difference (Ahmed, 2002). Specifically in a Canadian context, Haque (2010) argues, the hijab becomes a symbol of women’s oppression in non-Western conflict immigrant communities, and an example of an intolerable difference, which the tolerant multicultural state must reject to defend its existence.
In the multicultural context of Canada, the ethnic, cultural, national, and racial affiliations overlap in people’s definitions of identity (Mahtani, 2002; Paragg, 2014). Paragg (2014, p. 349) states that, “Within Canadian multicultural discourse, there are constant slippages between the terms race, ethnicity, culture, nationality, and blood.” Song (2009) mentions the difficulty faced by scholars in determining and defining social boundaries that couples cross to engage in intermarriage, noting that “most studies of intermarriage do not address the inherently messy business of deciding when intermarriage has (and has not) occurred, but tend to dive into an examination of the differential rates of intermarriage exhibited by some minority groups over others.” In the academic literature, many studies on mixed couples consisting of individuals belonging to different racial groups are from the U.S. context. Most scholars use the term *interracial* to describe these couples (Frankenberg, 1993; Childs, 2005; Nemoto, 2009; Vasquez-Tokos, 2017). Given the robustness of this literature, I am drawing extensively from this scholarship on interracial couples in the United States. In my call for participants, I used the term *interracial couple*, and most of the couples saw themselves as mixed due to the racial and cultural differences between them. However, in some cases their self-identifications were more complex. This raised question as to how couples viewed themselves as mixed and what differences mixedness encompassed in their relationship. For the most part, couples discussed the difference between race and culture. Some couples used race as a framework to talk about their mixedness, while others focused on cultural differences. Those who considered racial differences to be less significant than cultural differences, did not always connect their racial and cultural identities. In their narratives, however, race and culture were not separate categories, but fused together or overlapped. Further, couples discussed between themselves how their differences were salient in their everyday experiences as a couple, and how other people saw
them as different. For some of the couples, cultural differences became more significant in ways they negotiated their everyday life, while racial differences were more easily identified by others. Overall, it appears that couples in my study highlighted a gamut of differences between them, which played out distinctly depending on the social context.

For many, racial difference was often articulated in terms of culture, while for others cultural similarities mitigated racial difference. Elizabeth is a multiracial Canadian woman of white and Indian heritage, and her husband Otis is a white American man. Elizabeth said:

He [Otis] often doesn’t think of us as a mixed couple. No, it is true, didn’t you say that? [Playfully addressing her husband] Because he said, “I think of you as Elizabeth, and you are just who you are.” And, we don’t have a different religious background, we have similar like faith so there’s similarity there. We don’t have a different language background.

Elizabeth emphasized her identity as an individual to be more significant in her relationship with her husband Otis than her racial or cultural background. The couple felt that sharing a religious belief and speaking the same language (English) made them less of a mixed couple. However, they were often perceived as a mixed couple. Elizabeth was viewed as racially different, even though she was brought up in a very North American white middle class cultural setting. Therefore, Elizabeth’s perception of herself did not match how others perceived her.

As a couple, Elizabeth and Otis were seen as a mixed, even though they themselves did not think it was significant. Even when they were seen as a mixed couple, they did not see this as an issue in their everyday lives because in urban spaces like Vancouver, mixed couples were not a novelty. However, Elizabeth mentioned that people often classified her as Indian, even though she identified herself more as white than as Indian. She said that people around her assumed that her husband was Indian, same as her. Racial classification, as this example suggests, is primarily based on external perception and is often more important than self-definition. Cornell and
Hartmann (1998) also emphasized this distinction between race and ethnicity as discussed earlier in this chapter.

For Tamara and Sandy, a Black and white lesbian couple, the visual difference between them set them apart, even though both were raised in the same context. Tamara asserted that although she was “really Westernized” as a second-generation Canadian whose parents immigrated from a small Caribbean island and who was born and raised in Canada, she was constantly racialized as the other, even by people close to her. Her racial identity was more significant than her ethnicity, especially in terms of how people classified her. I have discussed earlier how Cornell and Hartmann (1998), argues that ethnicity matters when one classifies white people, but the ethnicity of people of colour is largely ignored and subsumed by their race, and thus the two should not be equated. This subsumption of ethnicity by race was relatively stark in the experiences of Black participants in my study. Tamara’s describes how her racial identity based on her skin colour became important in terms of how people classified her than her cultural identity as a Canadian woman. She believed that the significance placed on her racial identity also affected how others identified her and Sandy as an interracial couple. As Tamara explained:

I don’t really see myself as other. But I think that’s what makes it apparent that we are an interracial couple is mostly because they (others) talk about it so much. We talk about how the world perceives us as opposed to us in particular, I think. It’s also sort of the nature versus nurture thing too. Like, you know, how much of our similarities or differences have to do with, like what I look like as opposed to what my culture and upbringing was!

Sandy and Tamara were immediately identified as a mixed couple by others. Sandy felt that because Tamara was a Black woman, they became hypervisible as a couple. She believed that Tamara’s blackness became more salient in a racially charged political and cultural context.
Amongst Sandy and Tamara’s predominantly white peer group, racial politics was an important topic of conversation. Sandy said, “Tamara can’t help but be a symbol of racial tensions or dialogue about race and racism because she’s visibly Black, and in our friend group I would say it’s probably majority white.” Tamara became a symbol of racial difference in her peer group due to her blackness. Tamara believed that she was marked as the other, even though she saw herself as well integrated in Canadian society. Her adoption of Canadian culture did not affect how her blackness was perceived and classified. Her racial identity based on her skin colour and appearance carried more weight than her cultural identity.

In Tamara’s view, being Black made it harder for her to integrate in Canadian culture in spite of her efforts. In the individual interview I had with Tamara, she explained her predicament accordingly:

I do identify more as Canadian than a West Indian because I do think it’s quite – it’s like we were talking about earlier like the differences between being black in America and being black in Canada is that – my parents chose to come here and chose to integrate as much as possible. Really the only sort of cultural integration we had was with our own relatives, people like us because you know, we went to church with all the same people that they had all grown up with that have all come here … But it wasn’t-- like my mother especially really encouraged us to be as white as possible. My grandmother sort of held on to traditions more, told more stories about back home, described it more. And I’ve only been back once in life when I was very small. But yeah, since it wasn’t so pronounced as other families, of other West Indian kids like first generation kids that I knew because I think there was more of a need in my family to be more integrated with – like my mother would always say you have to work twice as hard to get half as far because people are always going to try and hold you back because you’re Black. So therefore, the way you present yourself has to be as mainstream Canadian – Canadian being white.

Tamara’s experience raises the question as to whether race is colour coded and tied solely and exclusively to visual presentation and perception, or whether it goes beyond the visual. As mentioned in the introduction, Daynes and Lee (2008) have explained how phenotype is only a part of the racial ensemble, which includes perception of phenotype, belief in race and racial
practice. Racial classification is characteristically unstable and depends upon the dominating structures and ideologies at a particular point in history.

A number of criteria have been employed to classify people into racial categories including ancestry and descent, legal/juridical norms (López, 1996), geographical origin (Goldberg, 2009), phenotype (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and cultural and religious markers (Fanon, 1967; Razack, 2008). Race is a multidimensional concept and a cognitive structure (Roth, 2015). These criteria vary in their significance for racial classification. They depend upon the socio-political context and of prevailing structures of power. According to Swanton (2010):

Race is best understood as an assemblage. As a precarious, open-ended achievement constituted through diverse relations and connections between material and conceptual elements that might include skin colour, segregation, clothing, religion, colonialism, DNA, law, travel, cultural habits, sexual mores, language, migration, and fear. (p. 2338)

Although unstable, racial classifications are significant because they determine the distribution of privilege and disadvantage, while also justify racial hierarchies and practices of racism.

Tamara mentioned that being a second-generation Black Caribbean immigrant is different because her family chose to migrate to Canada, as opposed to being a descendant of slavery. However, this engendered expectations for Tamara about her ability to integrate into mainstream Canadian culture, which was not fully accessible to her. As first-generation migrants, her parents wanted her to be as Canadian as possible. However, Canadianness remained tied to whiteness (Paragg, 2015). Tamara could try to emulate this Canadianness/whiteness, but never quite fully achieve or inhabit it. Her parents wanted her to have the same aspirations a white child would have, including a good education and job, even when they knew she would have to work much harder to achieve those due to her skin colour. Writing in the context of Australian multiculturalism, Hage (2000) discusses how a nation can be multicultural and inclusive, but still
be predicated as a white space, where power is held by white inhabitants who fashion themselves as nationalist managers while racialized immigrants are fashioned as national “ethnic objects” they feel empowered to manage. I discuss Hage’s (2000) theory on the relationship between race and nation in further detail in Chapter 5.

Tamara was racialized by others based on her skin colour, even though she was born and raised in Canada, and described herself as Canadian and assimilated into Canadian culture. Creese (2020) has discussed the racialization of second-generation Black immigrants in Vancouver, who are seen as “foreigners” due to their skin colour and even when they aspire to assimilate into Canadian culture. Anti-Black racism in Vancouver is further heightened by the relatively smaller Black communities in the city (Creese, 2020).

Racial identification, racial othering, and practices of racism must be placed together to make sense of everyday experience of race. Racial classification is closely tied to practices of racism and racialization, for example, Muslims as a religious minority have been racialized in the Canadian context (Razack, 2008). There has been a shift from biological to cultural racism and from a focus on natural to historical differences between races. “Cultural deficiencies are seen as historically developed and not biologically determined to exclude a group” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 331). Since public norms carry negative sanctions against biological racism, racial inequality is justified by blaming the inferior culture of minorities, including the presumed lack of family values, ambition, conservatism, and morality. In the present context, culture is actively being mobilized to draw racial borders, separating groups into civilized and barbaric, modern, and pre-modern, and moral and immoral (Razack, 2008; Mamdani, 2005). This shift in racist ideologies is especially evident in the racialization of Islam and Islamophobia in the present context. The shifts in how we talk about race, by tying it to cultural or religious differences, must be viewed
alongside ways in which race is identified and ascribed, tied to the materiality of bodies (such as skin colour and texture of hair) and concrete markers like a hijab, but also a name or a place of origin. These everyday experiences open other possibilities to understand this dialogue between visible and invisible racial markers. The experiences of some of the participants in my study brought these racial complexities to fore.

For Alana and Pepe, the mixed-couple label was complicated. They had been married for over 15 years but separated a few weeks before they approached me to be a part of my study. They felt that being interviewed together would help them to talk about themselves as a couple. Alana is Colombian, and often read as white. Pepe has a Japanese ethnic background, but he was born and raised in Colombia. His parents had migrated to Colombia before he was born. Both had lived in Canada since 2008. Since they shared a language and a culture, they did not experience the same degree of cultural differences as some other couples in my study, even though they were classified as a mixed couple by others. In fact, they talked about suddenly being made aware of their mixedness only after coming to Canada, when their friends referred to them as a mixed couple. As Pepe described,

This couple from the [United] States … said something, like, yeah, because we’re all mixed couples. And I’m, like, oh, yeah. To me, it was a whole new thing. I think, people who are close to me, for example, back then, wouldn’t see that … I won’t start to generalize it, but people in Colombia who were close to me got to the point that they completely forgot that I am, like, different in that sense.

Alana and Pepe felt that they were read as a mixed couple in the Canadian context, where being “mixed” was an acceptable and prevalent mode of classification. Although Pepe and Alana visibly present as racially different, they shared a culture. As Alana explained, “he has lived in a Latin American culture, he is not a stranger to me.”
Alana and Pepe did not see themselves as a mixed couple before they came to Canada. They felt depictions of mixedness were common in North America, where racial differences were sometimes presented in a positive light in advertising and popular culture, for example. Alana remarked that when an advertisement campaign for the clothing brand, “Benetton” celebrated mixedness by including several “visibly” interracial couples, she felt that she and Pepe qualified as mixed too. Media discourses celebrating mixedness and diversity often commodify such images to manufacture and sell a progressive and inclusive image of a brand (Childs, 2009; Burke, 2011). Alana and Pepe were perceived by others based on their visible differences to be racially and culturally distinct.

In other cases, mixed couples who appeared similar, negotiated differences that were not necessarily visible to onlookers. One such couple in my study was Hiromi, a Japanese woman, and her Canada-born Chinese husband Dan. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Dan did not consider them to be a mixed couple as they could both be identified as Asian. He believed that they would not be distinguished racially or culturally as they looked similar. However, Hiromi thought their cultural and national backgrounds marked them as different. In the Statistics Canada definition, they would be qualified as a mixed couple as they would be classified into two different visible minority group categories (Statistics Canada, 2014). The difference between them was more significant to Hiromi because she had immigrated to Canada while Dan was Canadian-born. Hiromi said that she felt like an outsider and this feeling informed how she identified as a couple. She explained,

There’s a lot of things that I think is quite different. And then not just the interracial stuff, he’s in his own country where I’m from somewhere else. That makes a little bit of a different scenario, I think. The feeling is so different. I left my own country while he still lives at home.
In Hiromi’s view, being a mixed couple highlighted qualities that went beyond visible differences. In her view, the problem was invisibility. She and Dan were culturally different from each other, but these differences were not recognized as they did not present visually. Many kids in the school that her children went to had white and Japanese parents and were recognised as mixed, but her kids were not seen in those terms. Hiromi said:

A lot of people … the couples that we know [are] interracial. So, kids go to Japanese class and often their moms are Japanese from Japan and fathers are mainly Caucasian … We look similar too. A lot of people actually think that he’s also Japanese or in the Japanese events and then if I go to Chinese events people think that I’m Chinese.

Hiromi felt it was a faulty perception that made people see her and her husband as a monoracial couple because they both presented as visually similar. The difference between them were muted by a pan-Asian label, also a mark of racism, which was used to identify and categorise people from the Asian countries as the same. Their differences, no matter how stark, were invisible because they could not be reduced to visible difference.

The category “Asian,” which is often used as an overarching way to group people belonging to different ethnicities and nationalities together, is the product of a dominant racial ideology that constrains how people may identify themselves and be identified by others (Shrikant, 2018). Hiromi struggled with the homogenising effect of this broader Asian category on how she and Dan were seen by others. Racial categories are reproduced, adapted, and redefined in different interactional contexts. For example, the category Asian American is a specific product of racial ideology in the American context, and it does not describe immigrants from different Asian countries (Shrikant, 2018). In the discussion of the relationship between race and ethnicity earlier in this chapter, I discussed how ethnic differences between people of colour are often muted by a racial designation that groups them together (Waters, 1990; Cornell
& Hartmann, 1998). This kind of classification positions white as an unmarked and normalised racial category, while other groups are placed in racial categories that are marked as different in relation to whites. In addition to this, there is a persistent white and non-white binary, which underlines how mixedness is perceived.

In the discussion of mixed couples, how partners are perceived, and classified is important in terms of when a couple is identified as mixed based on how they are seen as different or similar from each other. Liv is a multiracial white Québécois and Punjabi woman who is partnered with George, a white, Anglo-Canadian man. Liv told me that people did not always realize that she is in a mixed relationship as she was able to pass as white. In the couple interview, Liv and George discussed how they viewed themselves through the eyes of others:

Liv: Yeah, in my experience. Yeah, because I think most – a lot of people don’t see me as Punjabi, or a lot of people who are close to me, don’t really see me as Punjabi.

George: Yeah, I think you’re right. I think a lot of people don’t contextualize us as mixed couples. At least from the people we know, as a mixed-race couple, like I don’t think that reads to people, and I think a lot of people we know, because they are monolingual Anglophones they don’t understand how – Liv being Québécois could also impact that. So, they’ve – they just see us as just a couple.

Many of the mixed couples I interviewed explained that they experience themselves as mixed largely due to external reactions to their perceived differences. Yet despite their cultural differences, couples often viewed themselves as quite similar. In this case, Liv and George were seen as the same by others, but they saw the differences between them to be significant. Liv’s Québécois background made them a bilingual couple, and they were very aware of their differences, but those differences were not immediately perceived by others. Their experience is similar to that of Dan and Hiromi.
Liv explained that she felt more marked in her everyday life in Vancouver due to her Québécois identity rather than her Punjabi one. Vancouver has a large Punjabi community, but Liv could pass as white. However, her Québécois identity received more attention largely due to her French accent. Liv explained:

The discrimination I face is not related to my Indian background but to my French and Québécois identity. And it’s common, like, that people will discriminate against. The people have some conception about Quebec as the problematic province, and there is a lot of insidious comments about French in Quebec and that – I face that kind of discrimination regularly in Vancouver. But never related to my Indian background, because I don’t know – there are lots of – I don’t know, but that is my experience … I was talking to a lady in the bus, and she was asking me where I’m from, and she said – I said, “I’m from Quebec.” Oh, and she said, “No, you should’ve said you’re from Paris to people,” something, like, you know comments just like that, it’s said it as a joke but that’s a very microaggression joke.

Liv felt that she was more racialized due to her Québécois identity than her Punjabi one. In her experience, her “invisible” linguistic and cultural heritage became more salient than her visible difference in terms of her skin colour and appearance. This underscores the fact that visible or invisible differences become significant in different contexts. Empirical research on the experience of women of African origin in Canada whose English is undervalued due to the “African accent” contends that race can be read on other registers – including language and accent (Creese & Kambere, 2003).

One of the couples who also underlined the significance of Québécois identity in the context of mixed relationships are Ann, a white, Anglo-Canadian woman, and her husband Jacque, a white Québécois man. They both identify as white, but Ann is Anglophone and originally from British Columbia, while Jacque is Québécois. Even though they both were white, the pronounced cultural and ethnic differences between them made them similar to other mixed couples in my study. Anne and Jacque were very aware of their white privilege and how they
were able to move around the world without being read as different. However, in terms of
cultural differences, they saw themselves as an interethnic and mixed couple. Their differences
had more to do with culture and language, which is very different from the experience of other
interracial couples in this study, yet they felt these differences were more salient due to the
historical differences between Quebec and the rest of Canada.

Ann and Jacque reflected on their perceived differences as follows:

Ann: Like obviously we’re the same skin colour so I think that matches right to the
people would assume that in most ways we’re similar, and I think we are on certain
key levels, but I find like the culture difference comes out in interesting ways. We
don’t get strangers coming up to us and saying things for sure. Like nobody would
ever come to us like, oh you shouldn’t be together because the colour of your skin.
I noticed sometimes that my sister, like especially when she was dating her
boyfriend who was Iranian, like the issues with travel was stressful for them as a
couple. Like we’ve never experienced anything like that. So, our sense of the like,
going out to the wider world doesn’t have this complexity in terms of worrying
about the person’s going to be visually received. Nobody says to us, “oh your kids
are going to be so cute because they’re a mixed race,” right? People don’t
automatic, like until Jacque speaks, nobody would assume that we’re not from the
same place which I find actually really interesting. So, like visually, there’s no
marker that we’re different. In terms of children too, nobody would assume that our
child is not our own. So that’s what I heard from mixed race couples are like, they’ll
be in the park, and someone is going to say that, like are you babysitting or
something.

Jacque: Yeah. We’re lucky in that sense that we are [both] white!

Although they both identified racially as white and did not see their differences playing out
socially in ways it did for other interracial couples, Ann and Jacque felt that their situation was
unique because the political situation in Canada made Québécois identity more vulnerable and
marked than other non-English white ethnic groups in Canada with different cultural and
linguistic heritage.
The political history of Canada placed the French in opposition to a dominant English identity. Ann said:

You look at the history of Canada, they talk about the founding races originally. The French race and the English race and that has been replaced by the word nation. So now we talk about nations and Quebec is now called a distinct society.

Ann’s comments speak to the history where race has been a basis for national formation. Although scholars like Anderson (2006) conceptualize the nation to be an imagined community based on common language – not race – and argue for analytical separation between nationalism and racism, historically, race has been the basis for inclusion and exclusion from the nation (López, 1996). In the Canadian context, Québécois identity encourages one to think about how the process of racialization can operate through differences which are not visible, but which operate on ethnic/cultural registers. This brings one to the question of how difference can be assigned to different visible and invisible properties.

Ann and Jacque’s example allows for an examination of the conundrum of visibility and invisibility. Jacque and Ann’s experience also puts into relief how we consider mixedness and think about mixed couples where visible difference does not set them apart from each other. However, Jacque feels he is outside the white norm as a Québécois man. Jacque does not identify with English Canadian culture, but as Québécois, and this marks a departure from the idea of whiteness as a concrete entity. In the following conversation, the couple discuss their mixedness and its invisible nature:

Ann: I’ve noticed till when you hear Jacque talk, is that all of his difference becomes invisible which I’m not seeing that as harder or whatever that is but it’s just different experience.

Jacque: Yeah. It’s invisible and sometimes the issues, personally I feel sometimes I feel like I suck it up, like I should be part of this dominant culture.
Ann: I didn’t really think of it that way until this interview, which is good. Well, if maybe if our skin colour was different, it would be something that we might be more aware of it? Maybe, maybe not, because there would already be this assumption that we are different towards, if actually the outside assumptions were the same.

Jacque’s identity as Québécois complicates conceptions of whiteness. Although Jacque and Ann are conscious of their white privilege, they believe their experience of being a mixed couple is important in the Canadian context. The term Québécois was associated with a group marked as a different and inferior to the dominant Anglo majority, both in terms of race and nation. Québécois as a group was deemed inferior to Anglo-Canadians and this difference was underlined by their relative marginalization. This is the historical context that Jacque was referencing.

McRoberts (1988) considers the case of Quebec to be a challenge to the assumptions of political integration and cultural homogenization in the modern nation-state context. McRoberts’ (1988) historical analysis of political and economic development in Quebec, vis-a-vis the rest of Canada, draws attention to the federal policies that supported patterns of uneven development and regional/linguistic dominance that reinforced the political and economic dependence and subordination of Quebec in English Canada. External control and initiative came to characterise Quebec’s modernisation and economic development (Valliéres, 1971). McRoberts (1988) claims that, “the French Canadian in Montreal associated economic and occupational mobility with the ability to speak English” (p. 74). The cultural differences between Francophones and Anglophones led to a cultural division of labour to the former’s disadvantage through prevailing relations of hierarchy and segmentation between them in the capital and labour markets. As McRoberts (1998) puts it: “when industrial structures were established in Quebec they were based on an ethnic hierarchy” (p. 26). This undergirded the backdrop for the development of national consciousness and political mobilisation in Quebec.
Historically, the relations of dominance and subordination between Québécois and English Canadians can be traced back to the Royal Proclamation of 1763 which declared English to be the official language (McRoberts, 1988, p. 44). These harsh assimilationist measures directed at the French could not be enforced due to internal resistance. However, the unequal hierarchy that was created between Anglophones and Francophones was established and supported by Canadian politics and policies that favored the economic and cultural interests of the English, such as the subjugation of education to Anglo officials and encouragement of English-speaking immigrants to Quebec (McRoberts, 1988, p. 51). McRoberts (1988) argues that the impact of these developments “changed Quebec once and for all from a homogenous French-Canadian society to one with a prosperous and vocal English minority” (p. 46). Elsewhere in Canada, Francophone minorities were deprived of their rights to maintain their cultural and linguistic identity, which forced them to accept English dominance in political, economic, and cultural terms. McRoberts (1988) concludes that over the years the political, and economic changes in Canadian and Quebecois society may have mitigated the impact of such historical inequities and the need to mobilise against them, but he claims that “this apparent decline in the role of nationalism within Quebec political life need not mean a decline in national identity itself” (p. 432).

In his personal and political account of being a Québécois nationalist, Vallières (1971) has likened the situation of the working class in Quebec to Blacks in the United States. He considered the differences between Québécois and Anglo-Canadians to be similar to the differences between whites and Blacks in the United States largely due to the difference in economic and political power between the two groups, and the pattern of dominance and subordination that has characterised their relationships.” In his view, the only difference between
Blacks and working-class Québécois is “the colour of their skin and the continent they come from” (Valliéres, 1971, p. 21). Such a statement simplifies the experiences of the two groups. The Québécois in Canada experience racial privilege and receive wages of whiteness even if the internal hierarchy disadvantages them in relation to the English. The French are recognized as a founding nation in Canada along with the English, even if symbolic such official recognition legitimises their claim to the national space vis-à-vis other ethnic and racial minorities. While drawing parallels between Blacks and Quebecois is problematic, Valliéres’ (1971) analysis underlines how the differences between Francophones and Anglophones is commonly characterized in racial terms within histories of settler colonialism and in the discourse of Québécois nationalism. This larger backdrop of the French and English as distinct and unequal “races” helps to explain why Jacque and Ann insisted on presenting their differences as racial terms and why they thought they should be participants in a study that investigated interracial unions. Valliéres’ (1971) viewpoint represents a powerful strand of thought in Québécois nationalism. It is based on his conviction that Québécois people are treated as second class citizens in Canada and that the region is exploited for its resources, an extractive process that only serves the economic interests of the English.

This complex history of the English and French, racial hierarchy and difference plays out in Jacque and Ann’s everyday life as a couple, even when it is invisible to people who read them as “just another white couple.” Ann believed that although she and Jacque were both white, the difference between them in terms of culture, language, and history in the Canadian context was more significant than broader ethnic difference and closer to racial difference, even if it was not exactly the same. Thus, in her opinion she and Jacque were also a mixed couple.
Jacque agreed with her and argued for a different understanding of the idea of mixed couples in the Canadian context:

I’m just going to say that I think the idea of non-mixed couple I think it is wrong. In a country that’s so young as Canada, I think this idea that culture is founded on non-mixed culture is wrong. You can’t argue that it’s not, I think in my head there’s more mixed couple than there is, than we think. In the sense that there’s so many differences, we always see Canada as a same culture, but we see, when you look at their story of BC. I think the question of mixed families in Canada. I think it’s a lot more, Canada is a young country, so I think it’s a lot more present in the story of Canada like we think. Like when you look at the story of Quebec like the east, that was mixed with the native, the mixes or counter mixed between different cultures, and I guess at that time will be mixed race.

Jacque points out that mixedness we are celebrating today in Canada is not a new phenomenon, but it has existed earlier in Canadian history, most notably in the case of intermixing between indigenous and colonial settlers of primarily French heritage. Mahtani (2014) also has also pointed out the silencing of histories of intermixing that underline the settler colonial nature of the Canadian state, as Métis were denied indigenous status by the Canadian state. Mahtani (2014) asserts that scholarship on intermixing and mixed-race studies ignores “aboriginal forms of mixed race experience, particularly the regulation of Métis people” (p. 48). Echoing Jacque’s point about intermixing existing in Canada for a long time, Mahtani (2014) criticizes the framing of intermixing as a new phenomenon. Jacque regards mixedness to be a broader phenomenon that does not only includes interracial couples. Scholars have argued that mixedness is a widespread value in Montreal and Quebec (Le Gall & Meintel, 2015; Meintel, 2002). According to Meintel (2002),

Ideological currents that predominated Quebec society and public discourse since the quiet revolution. For decades Quebec public discourse has been permeated by the preoccupation with language and culture as the manifestations of identity, and of the right to keep one’s language and culture. (p. 115)
The reflections offered by Ann and Jacque encourage us to think of how mixedness shapes Canadian identity, a point which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5. However, what we gather from these responses is that racial difference can be read differently in different contexts through language and accent and thus goes beyond the visible register as defined by Statistics Canada (2014).

These insights raise questions as to how we define race as visible difference, especially in a country like Canada, where race is coded as visible difference most explicitly in the term “visible minority.” In some ways the experiences of interracial couples, especially partners of colour are very different from those reported by Ann and Jacque, which they acknowledge earlier in this chapter discussing the racial privilege they had in relation to racial minorities. Yet their experience points towards the diversity differences within whiteness. Jacque, as a white Québécois man, asserts that he is outside the white Anglo norm. His experience of marginalization can be contextualised in the historical difference of power between Anglo and Québécois nations in Canada. Another male Québécois participant in this study, Lan, mentioned the need to underline difference between Anglo and French whiteness in Canada. Lan said, “So white French, we are like in Canada. I mean, that’s part of the white, the dominant group, right? But we are also dominated, right? And I feel these days to be – if I were to just bring back like Quebec oppressed history, it was nothing compared to aboriginals … but we can’t talk about it.” Similar to Jacque, Lan also felt Québécois whiteness was subordinate to dominant Anglo-whiteness. Ann and Jacque believed that the idea of mixed couples should be broadened to include experiences like theirs. I believe this can be useful from a comparative perspective and encourages us to consider the difference between race and ethnicity in everyday lived experience.
In the next section I focus on the positive connotations associated with mixed couples in the context of diversity and multiculturalism in Canada. The complex relationship between race and ethnicity discussed earlier in this chapter also comes into relief here, as Québécois identity could be classified as an ethnic identity based on difference of language and culture.

3.2 Being Mixed and Being Exceptional

Mixed relationships have been met with social and institutional opposition historically. This is reflected in anti-miscegenation laws and in social sanctions imposed against racial proximities (Kennedy, 2003; Mawani, 2009). Today, by contrast, we see a cultural and public discourse that celebrates mixedness (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Mahtani, 2014). I asked my participants to think about how these public discourses played out in their personal experiences. Therefore, I asked the couples in my study about the responses they received from their family, friends, institutions, and the public in general, and how these responses influenced how they felt about their mixed status.

Some of the couples in my study believed that being a mixed couple set them apart as exceptional; they felt that they were different from other couples. These couples had a strong sense of self as a mixed couple, and they described themselves as being more progressive and open to difference. They thought they were quick to learn about racial and cultural difference and worked hard on their relationships because of the additional challenges they had faced and overcome. Other couples self-consciously talked about how they were being perceived as different and exceptional by onlookers, even though they did not always see themselves in those terms. Several of the couples I interviewed used words like “interesting,” “trendy,” or “cool” to describe how their partnership was viewed by others. Some of the couples believed that being mixed was a positive thing and could bring some advantages. For instance, Liv, an Indian and
white Québécois mixed-race woman, and her partner George, a white Anglo man, described their partnership in terms of “privilege”:

Liv: In a way it [being a mixed couple] gives privilege.

George: Yeah. I was just going to say that. Because we’re like this, like, we’re like a cosmopolitan cool couple, right? Like, we speak multiple languages, and we travel all over the world and we’re smarter and more erudite than you, right?

George and Liv talk about being a mixed couple as privileged in an ironical manner. They felt their mixed status made people think they were special in some ways and being mixed had afforded them opportunities to learn more about other cultures and languages. Their travelling made them appear more cosmopolitan and thus admirable.

Earl and Sheila, an older married couple, felt they were hypervisible. Couples of their age would remember them because they were different. Earl said:

We know a lot of people and we were very active in the community and time and time and time again, we would meet somebody, and they would say, ‘I remember seeing you weeks or two months ago,’ and we don’t even remember seeing them let alone remember their name, whereas they remember us instantly because we are mixed. It’s not because they have got better memories, but we might be the only mixed couple they may know and so we stand out. So, we are constantly conscious of that.

Earl’s experience suggests that his partnership with Sheila made them more recognizable because people found them to be different and thus memorable. In Earl and Sheila’s case, their age added to their visibility because the numbers of mixed couples have increased over time, and elderly mixed couples like them are relatively less likely to be common. Earl and Sheila lived in an affluent suburban community with many retired people, and perhaps in this subgroup mixed couples were even more unusual.

Several of the participants said that being in a mixed relationships had affected their own sense of identity in significant ways. For example, Nina, an Indian woman, explains how being
in a mixed relationship with Jim, her white American husband, has affected how she sees her identity and described her personal experience. Nina’s reactions were based on the adjustments they had to make to get to know each other’s families and to travel, as they were both immigrants in Canada. She said:

> It has completely opened my world even more, I feel more cosmopolitan, I feel more like a world citizen, and I don’t know, I think that I was something I’m always seeking because I never found that back at home. I didn’t find comfort in just knowing a certain group of people, I wanted to broaden my horizons more and being in this relationship helps us do that and it’s interesting how that happens.

Thus, Nina viewed her relationship as giving her access to different experiences and people. It provided her with a “cosmopolitan” identity. Being in a mixed relationship played an important role in shaping her sense of self. Nina shared this experience with some of the other participants in my study. For example, both Maxine, a white American and Canadian woman, and her partner Rajesh, a South Asian man from India, also described their experience of being a mixed couple in a similar way:

Maxine: I feel so special, unique, and like when we do meet those couples and I’m like, yes, this is so cool and so fun and so interesting, but also, I’m like, that’s our thing, like that we are that special and we are that unique does that make sense? Do you feel like that?

[Asking Rajesh]

Rajesh: We feel special to have this mixed [relationship]. Because – I don’t think if you have even within only one culture you get this exposure. Again, it comes back to like living in your own comfortable space and never trying anything different.

They saw their relationship as special because they felt the coupling of a white woman with a South Asian male is rare. Upon further discussion, Rajesh contrasted their relationship to that of a monoracial couple as follows:

If you tell this to like a single-race couple, they don’t get it, like “it’s very normal, what’s the big deal about it?” But it is a big deal. I think for those couples, they don’t – the
challenges that mixed couples are actually going through – they don’t even know how much impact they have on the individual lives … We are doing what they are doing, but something one step more than. We have to do the same exact thing they are doing, and also, we have to do more extra work to survive.

Rajesh and Maxine had faced skepticism from friends and family about their relationship and had to negotiate it, which shaped his point of view. He felt the opposition they experienced made them different from monoracial couples who did not have to face social censure because they conformed to norms prescribing racial endogamy.

Ann described her relationship with Jacque, her Québécois husband, also in exceptional terms. Ann felt that being with a partner who was different from her allowed her to feel she had access to a valuable experience of difference. Most of the couples said that they often received “positive” attention from people. One of the couples described themselves as follows: “we are interesting, and people are interested.”

Chrystal, who is white and partnered with Ronald, who is multiracial (Indonesian and Dutch), had the chance to get front row seats at a comedy show where they wanted the audience to appear diverse. Chrystal said,

Like they were going to show it on TV, we ended up getting to sit in one of the front rows? And I think it was because it was filmed in like Richmond or something? Like in an area with not very many people of colour and so because Ronald was – and he was like our pass.

Ronald, a mixed-race man, became a symbol of diversity as the TV show asked him to sit in the front row as an expression of openness and progress. The value of mixed-race people as a sign of diversity and acceptance in the Canadian context has been remarked upon by scholars like Mahtani (2014). This performance of diversity may highlight an undercurrent of racialization, as superficial appearance of inclusion of people of colour ignores the need for addressing real racial
disparities and inequalities. Chrystal talked about the positive attention they received from people. She said:

We get positive attention as well and like, “oh look at that!” Like in the same way that you sometimes – your gay couple to describe like, “oh you’re so cute!” like, “look at you holding hands,” like it’s patronizing almost? I think we get that sometimes too, it’s not necessarily discrimination, it’s more like I don’t know, I am striving for the right word, but like special, like, like, different or cool, I don’t know. I think because we’re different we can kind of fit into different types of crowds as well.

Although this attention that mixed couples receive appears to be positive, Chrystal described it as patronising. This could indicate her underlying skepticism towards being a part of a mixed couple, as she and her partner drew attention and admiration because they were outside of the norm. She compares the responses they received to people’s reactions towards gay couples. In Chrystal’s opinion such positive attention is patronising. Both interracial and gay couples are outside the normative ideal of the heterosexual and monoracial couple (Steinbugler, 2012). The surface compliments that Chrystal described are used to display support for gay and interracial couples. Heterosexuality and monoraciality continue to be the basis for normative couplehood (Steinbugler, 2012). Race and sexuality mark these couples as different and thus diverging from the norm.

Sandy and Tamara, a white and Black lesbian married couple describe how many people see them as exceptional and often assume this means it is difficult for them to be together.

Sandy: We feel like there’s a lot of folks who kind of idolize or idealize our relationship and are like you guys have the best marriage and this and that but of course we have a marriage … I think people imagine we are more different than we actually are because of that.”

Tamara: Or that it’s more difficult for us to be happy because we’re different or something.
Sandy: But that leads them to this sort of like wow you guys are so great together.
Tamara: I don’t think that is the case, actually. I think that that feeling is because of the visible difference between the two of us.
These responses, from these couples and others around them, which mark their relationship as exceptional, is also tied to the normative assumption of monoraciality, which suggests that interracial couples are an exception and uncommon.

Strangers and acquaintances also remarked on the children of mixed couples. An oft-repeated comment was, “your kids would be beautiful.” Although most of the mixed couples I interviewed felt such comments were harmless, others remarked that these comments also suggested that they were not a normal couple. Some of the couples experienced hostile reactions in public spaces that were not very diverse or from elderly people who were not used to seeing mixed couples. For example, two Asian and white couples in my study compared Vancouver with the suburbs, like Richmond and Chilliwack, and talked about how they received more stares and hostile looks in the suburbs in comparison with the city centre. Thus, the distance between acceptance and hostility was not very far.

At times friends cautioned couples about their relationship and the potential roadblocks they may face. May, an Asian Taiwanese woman in a lesbian partnership with Emma, her white Canadian partner, describes the reaction of her colleague to mixed relationships: “He said, ‘well, in the first few years, maybe you are still in honeymoon stage, but after you pass that, there are going to be problems.’” This friend knew about their LGBTQ status and did not appear to be biased against their sexuality. However, May felt that he was skeptical towards their interracial status.

Although most of the couples reported subtle hints of skepticism and disapproval against them, a few experienced overt hostility towards their mixed status. Anita, a white bisexual woman who was partnered with Kris, a Korean-Canadian man, described the hostile reactions she faced from some of her white male friends. One of the male friends told her that Anita chose
an Asian guy since she was bi-sexual and also attracted to women. He told her that she liked women, but since women were too feminine for her, she chose an Asian guy. This plays into the racial stereotype of Asian men as overly feminine. Anita described the experience accordingly: “This super inflammatory comedian type of guy who just thought it was cool to be rude, he didn’t worry about comedy, he was just always insulting.” This experience plays into the sexual stereotypes attached to men and women from different races. Maxine, a white American-Canadian woman, discussed that her white landlady was uncomfortable when her partner, Rajesh, an Indian man, visited her. Maxine describes her landlady’s reaction: “she was like, you know I have two daughters, and I don’t know like what kind of people you’re bringing home, like, I don’t want them to be scared.” Maxine did not confront her landlord on what she perceived as a racist reaction but cited the British Columbia tenancy law to tell her she could not limit who Maxine invited as guests. Maxine believed that her landlord viewed Rajesh as scary because he was a Brown man. His darker skin was marked as a sign of danger by Maxine’s white landlord. This can be placed in the context of historical and contemporary readings of dark-skinned men as suspect of embodying danger and criminality (White, 2019).

Gina, a white Canadian woman, is married to Phil, a Mexican man. Phil immigrated to Canada as her spouse. She said that the reaction people have to them as a couple is based on stereotypical ideas about immigration. She believes that the assumption is that her husband is a lucky man because he migrated to Canada through his marriage and will be able to have better economic opportunities. She finds it offensive as her husband had a highly paid job in Mexico, but people assumed that moving to Canada was economically advantageous for him. Gina felt that people were skeptical of Phil’s motives because he came from a country which was relatively less developed compared to Canada. It appears that structural global inequality, which
places countries in a relation of hierarchy to each other based on their economic prowess, provided the larger frame that guided the assumptions people made about their relationship.

The couples reported negative interactions and experiences from institutions like border security, which highlighted their mixedness. Gina and Phil had a hard time crossing the border to the United States, where the customs officer made remarks about them being mixed and unmarried:

Phil: This particular time, as we are going, both of us get to the officer, and he’s like – he’d see like a Mexican passport and a Canadian passport, and he were like, “What’s the deal with you?” Like we were like, “Oh, we are a couple.” “Are you married?” And we were like, “No, we are common law.”

Gina: He was like, “That doesn’t mean anything.”

The fact that they were not married but common-law gave an excuse to the border officer to discredit their partnership. The couple believed this happened because they were an interracial couple. Such occasions also made them aware of the different treatment the two partners received based on their race and nationality.

In terms of reactions from family and friends, most couples had positive experiences. However, some faced opposition from their families who were worried about the repercussion of choosing a partner who was not from the same cultural background. Earl and Sheila, the oldest couple in my study, explained that neither were expecting to meet someone from a different racial background as they both grew up in monoracial social circles. In Earl’s case, marrying someone who was non-white was not even a consideration because it was never discussed in his predominantly white social context. For Sheila, her family believed that good Chinese girls would never choose a white partner. It was seen as a “loose thing to do,” and there were social sanctions attached to it. Years later, Earl recalled that Sheila’s niece, who married a white man told him, “I want you to know that I’m really glad that you are not a bastard. That you were nice...
to my Sheila, and you have two beautiful children, because that made it possible for me to do what I’m doing today.”

Nina’s South Asian family, by contrast, disapproved of Jim and wanted her to meet someone from the same racial-cultural background and tried to introduce her to “more suitable” matches. Rajesh’s Indian family was also reluctant to accept Maxine because they wanted him to marry someone from his own culture. However, their disapproval was framed in terms of preference and cultural match. While Maxine’s mother was comfortable with her choice, she worried about the challenges they may face. “My mom grew up before interracial marriage was legal,” Maxine explained. “It was met with not very accepting opinions at times. And I think that me telling her that I was in an interracial relationship brought up those like feelings she experienced.”

Kiara, a White Canadian woman who is partnered with Arya, an Iranian-Canadian man, said her mother was supportive. However, her mother also cautioned her about Arya’s values as she was worried about how her daughter would be treated, given the stereotypical assumptions about women in Islamic cultures. Kiara reflected on her mother’s views as follows:

She had all of these stereotypes in her head that there were times – it was just like little things that she had this idea of Iran being very traditional – she is a relatively strong feminist. And I think that that was her biggest concern.

Kiara’s mother suspected Arya of harbouring cultural values that could potentially affect her daughter negatively. She assumed that he may have such values because he is a Muslim man whose family immigrated to Canada from Iran. Although Kiara is critical of her mother’s assumptions about Muslim men and people from Iran, she also defends her mother’s behaviour by pointing out that she is “a relatively strong feminist.” In this case, feminism becomes a justification for Kiara’s mothers’ behaviour.
Terman (2016) argues that the feminist emphasis on gender justice is often appropriated by imperialist agendas and converges with Islamophobic discourses that use the idea of gender justice to marginalize Muslims. Such discourses see gender inequality to be a problem only in some (non-Western) countries and some (non-white) cultures, which are then racialized as truths. Terman (2016) also points out the need to criticize assumptions about violence against women within debates on Western imperialism but underlines the challenges of avoiding these debates and how they provide fuel for Islamophobia. She calls it “the double bind between imperialism and gender injustice” (Terman, 2016, p. 79).

Kiara considered her mother to be supportive of her relationship despite her initial reservations about Arya. Overall, it appears that even when interracial relationships are supported by family and friends, in many instances the support is contingent on proving the initial stereotypical expectations about the relationship are wrong. Here, the concept of “supportive opposition” developed by Frankenberg (1993) that I discussed in the introduction, is relevant. Frankenberg (1993) described supportive opposition to be a tendency when people support interracial unions, but raise concerns about them, which are articulated in non-racial terms. The concerns raised by Kiara’s mother about Arya’s culture, or by Maxine’s mother, who worried about how her daughter and her partner will be treated by others, may be examples of supportive opposition. Nina and Rajesh’s parents were also opposed to their relationship because they wanted their children to choose partners from their own communities. In Nina’s case they also disapproved of Jim because of his profession as a freelancer, which they didn’t see as well-paid and stable. In Rajesh’s case, his family wanted him to have a partner who shared his culture and language.
At times overt support does not mean that parents did not have any reservations about their children’s choice of partners. For instance, Jim’s mother was supportive of Nina, but once she told her that their “kids would look like monkeys.” Nina’s mother-in-law’s choice of words, describing mixed-race children as monkeys, as – animals, reflects a longstanding contempt for racial mixing. This was a comment made after she had been drinking and was explained away as a joke. However, it is illustrative of how stereotypes about racial mixing are deeply ingrained and continue to exist and find expression in different social and familial contexts. Askanius (2021) has discussed the ways in which racial ideology is supported by patterns of translation and recontextualization of racial humour in different contexts. In her work on racial memes used by a neo-Nazi organisation, she has explained that “the juxtaposition of monkeys/gorillas and people of colour is imbricated with historical narratives of blackness and whiteness and works as a particularly dehumanizing hate joke” (Askanius, 2021, p. 156).

Sometimes discomfort around racial difference was expressed through omission instead of reaction. Liv described how her partner’s white Canadian parents reacted to her Indian heritage by totally ignoring it and focusing instead on her Québécois side, which they found more appealing. Her partner George describes his middle-class liberal parents’ response as follows. “You can be another race as long as you can speak English pretty well.” It appears that the fact that Julie was highly educated made her more acceptable to George’s parents. Overall, the race hierarchy is also in play in how families reacted to mixed-race couples. Parental reactions were often positive, but complicated.

Similarly, Sandy talked about how her parents took a while to accept her marriage to a Black woman. After they accepted her wife Tamara, it became a source of pride for them. According to Sandy, “they wear it like a badge of honour.” Sandy believes that having a Black
daughter-in-law gave her white parents proof of being progressive and liberal. It appears that by seeing themselves as progressive for being in the position of accepting a Black woman into the family, Sandy’s parents demonstrate how racial hierarchies are still alive, as white people are actors who are in the position to accept as a mark of their generosity and superiority. Similarly, Anita, a white woman, reported that her family was willing to accept her Korean-Canadian partner Kris as they did not see themselves as racist towards Asians. They believed “Asian people” are hardworking and received Kris positively, but they refused to afford the same acceptance to her brother’s Indigenous girlfriend, who was seen as a ‘bad influence.’ Argon, an Indian-Canadian woman married to a white American man, described how the church her husband Sneed’s mother was a member of welcomed her with enthusiasm, as they were “pretty excited that there was a Brown person in the church.” The church membership was predominantly white, and they were proud to host a mixed wedding to appear more open to diversity. However, she interpreted this as an expression of “white liberal racism” because they wanted to use her presence to signal their progressiveness. Some of Sneed’s family members who were church-goers did not attend their Indian wedding in a temple because they did not want to be in a different place of worship. Argo and Sneed felt the desire to appear progressive motivated their actions more than being progressive in actual practice.

Racial hierarchies informed how families reacted to different partners across generations. Phil, a Mexican man, explained that his grandmother liked his wife Gina because she was white, and she preferred white partners for him. May, a Taiwanese woman partnered with Emma, a white Canadian transwoman, claims that if she had been with a white man, she would have been seen as a success. Tamara described her mother’s reaction to her wife Sandy, who is white:

They probably feel a little more proud that I had a white person in my life than a Black person because it’s a weird thing, like white is always better in certain cultures … So, there
is some sort of undercurrent of even though we know we are supposed to marry within our own, your child will have a leg up in the world the more white they are then, so bizarre.

Tamara’s mother’s reaction could be naively read as the internalization of racial hierarchy, which made her value a white partner over a Black partner. However, it is clear that she saw Tamara having a white partner as opposed to a Black partner as more advantageous for her, “a leg up.” This is an expression of internalization of a racial hierarchy.

Twine (2010) has described how the whiteness of mothers could be a resource for bi-racial children. Their whiteness is a form of social capital that can be used to advocate for their children in different situations where whiteness is valued, for example in interactions with institutions like schools. I would argue that whiteness can be seen as an asset more broadly, and that could explain why Tamara’s mother would prefer for her to have a white partner instead of a Black partner. Thus, the reactions of families and friends of people of colour were also mediated by considerations for prevailing racial hierarchies and the assessment of its possible effects in society. It appears that racial hierarchy is internalised across groups turning whiteness into a kind of asset or privilege in the context of intimacy.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed how mixed couples I interviewed related to the idea of their mixedness. I was particularly interested in how they defined themselves in relation to the official definitions of mixed couples offered by Statistics Canada. Drawing on the experiences and views of my participants, I critically examined the idea of mixedness and its multiple meanings, and how racial difference could be read beyond visible difference. In the everyday lived realities of the couples participating in my study, differences across the lines of visibility and invisibility, race and ethnicity, internal identification and external assessment become muddled as they
navigate their different situations. I describe the couples’ own sense of identity as well as their responses and reactions of others to their partnership, and the gaps between how they saw themselves and how others saw them. In the emerging context of multicultural Canada, many placed positive value on mixedness, and the couples were aware of how they were seen as symbols of progressiveness and acceptance. However, these assumptions are complicated, and what appears to be seemingly progressive can work to further reinforce racial hierarchies. In the next chapter, I focus on how mixed couples engage with racism in Canadian society. I examine whether and in what ways their experiences of intimate relations across racial boundaries might lead to racial literacy.
Chapter 4: Racial Literacy and Interracial Intimacy: Expectations and Experiences

Earl: Of course. I grew up in a town where, as I told you, no one was Black, no one was Asian, no one was Brown, no one was First Nations, none, it was all white. The weirdest kid in school happened to be somebody who just happened to be Polish-American, I mean, and so it was that stereotypical. Of course, I knew nothing about racism, and it’s taken decades to learn that I’m still learning. I still am. You never get over it and I still have feelings of anxiety sometimes and I don’t think it will ever go away and so there is a racist down there in all of us.

Earl, whom I have introduced in earlier chapters, is a white American man in his late 70s who is married to Sheila, a Chinese-Canadian woman. They have been married since for over four decades and have raised two children together. Earl recounted his personal journey of learning about race and racism through his experiences in the world, and most importantly through his marriage to Sheila and their children. Earl and Sheila were the oldest couple in my study, and they had been married at a time when interracial intimacy was viewed negatively in Canada and the United States. In the U.S. context, anti-miscegenation laws criminalized interracial intimacy until 1967, and interracial sex and marriage were prohibited by law in many states (Kennedy, 2004; Moran, 2001). In the Canadian context, such laws were not enacted in the same form. However, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the possibilities of interracial intimacies between different racial groups led to anxieties about racial purity and contamination. In British Columbia, for example, interracial sexual relations were interpreted as a threat to the survival of the white settler-colonial regime (Mawani, 2009).

Earl was aware of the depth and prevalence of racism in society, as the opening quote above suggests. Even after decades of being in an interracial marriage, he was still susceptible to racial thinking and logics. As he declared in the epigraph above, “there is a racist down here in
all of us.” During our interview, Earl displayed a deep awareness of the working of race and racism as a structural force in contemporary society. Would it be fair to credit his experience of interracial intimacy to his awareness and knowledge of racism? Did his marriage with Sheila help him develop a kind of “racial literacy”? Many of the respondents in my study, including Earl, saw a connection between their experiences with interracial intimacy and the insights they developed into the racial structure of society. Building on this theme, this chapter focuses on the experiences and insights that my interviewees had with racism.

To examine the process through which participants develop an awareness of racism in society and within themselves, I use the concept of racial literacy developed by Twine (2010). Whereas Twine’s (2010) study focuses on the development of racial literacy amongst white mothers of Black and biracial children, my study focuses on the expressions of racial literacy among white men and women who are partnered with people of colour. These mothers, especially from lower class backgrounds, experienced “rebound racism” (Frankenberg, 1993), and partly lost their racial privilege. These mothers were “unwhitened” through their association with Black men and were often ostracised by their own families and stigmatized by British society. A few of them were able to locate their personal experience in broader structures of race and racism to develop what Twine (2010) calls racial literacy. However, not all women who experienced rebound racism and raised biracial children developed racial literacy. Twine (2010) reported that many of the white women she studied saw the stigma they faced as gendered oppression, failing to connect it with racial oppression.

Scholars have discussed and debated if and how interracial intimacy enables white partners to be more aware of their racial privilege and to empathize with the experiences of racism and racial disadvantage that members of their family face (Twine, 2010; Twine &
In her empirical study of how white mothers of Black children develop awareness about racism, Twine (2010) conceptualizes racial literacy as “a way of perceiving and responding to their racial climate and racial structures that individuals encounter daily. Racial literacy includes discursive, material, and cultural practices in which parents can train themselves and their children to recognize, name, challenge, and manage various forms of everyday racism” (p. 8). Twine and Steinbugler (2006) explain that close relations with people of colour in intimate contexts can motivate white people to become aware of the workings of racial logics and systemic racism in society. Thus, intimate relations across racial lines, they suggest, can foster understandings and social consequences for racism in society. Twine and Steinbugler (2006) illuminate three dimensions of racial literacy: double consciousness, negotiation of local racial meanings, and routine and everyday forms of racism. Building on these insights, I use the concept of racial literacy broadly in this chapter to understand how experiences with interracial intimacy can help white people become more aware of the racial structure of society which places them in positions of advantage and privilege and also structures their romantic preferences.

Frankenberg’s (1993) pioneering ethnographic study in which she interviewed white women in interracial relationships is especially useful. Her study points to the opportunities that these relationships can afford white people as they become aware of institutional racism and their own positions of privilege. But as Frankenberg explains, these opportunities do not always lead to such forms of awareness. Frankenberg’s study showed that white women could be with partners who were people of colour, but still believe in a racial ideology based on racial hierarchy.
Twine (2010) argues that the unique position of simultaneously being cultural insiders and racial outsiders can provide white women in mixed families with the ability to navigate racial and cultural differences. However, the development of actual racial literacy is not a given or an automatic consequence. Women who developed racial literacy often had other experiences, like sustained activism. In her study, only a minority of respondents were able to interrogate their own racial privilege and understand how society was racially structured. This depended on racial and ethnic composition of their friendship networks, affiliation to anti-racist organizations, exposure to overt white racism, racial consciousness of their partners and integration into the Black community.

hooks (1992) claims that interracial intimacy can have transformative possibilities if it is based on a mutual recognition of racism. However, there is often a tendency to silence the conversation on race and racism by celebrating cultural difference in an ahistorical, non-contextual manner. Childs (2005) has observed that mixed Black and white couples employed both a race-conscious and a colour-blind discourse while constructing their relationships. Many couples that relied on colour-blind discourse experienced racism but interpreted such experiences in non-racial terms. Couples who were race conscious were aware of racial discrimination and described explicit strategies they used to deal with racism. In this chapter, I examine how some couples recognized and named racism while others avoided naming it, and the context in which this happens.

4.1 Racial Literacy in Practice: Everyday Experiences of Mixed Couples

In this section I outline the process through which white partners in mixed relationships believed they developed racial literacy by learning from the experiences of their partners. Some white partners claimed to have witnessed the challenges that their partners have faced and were able to
empathize with them. I explore how white partners believed that being in an intimate relationship with a person of colour helped them to learn from their partner’s experiences to racism to develop a sense of race consciousness.

Several of my participants believed this to be the case. However, their experiences and reflections highlight the complexity of the process of developing racial literacy and the challenges it presents to white partners who were trying to empathise with and learn from their partners’ experiences. Chrystal, a white woman in a long-term relationship with Ronald, a mixed-race man, describes her experience of learning about race through Ronald’s experiences:

When I started dating Ronald, I guess I didn’t realize, because I’m white, so I didn’t realize you know how racist people are, that kind of thing, and so being with him has sort of open my eyes a lot, so it’s something that I do think about a lot because it has completely changed my perspective, like my world view is different now … when people are making stereotypes or are judgmental or racist, I take it more, like it would offend me before but now personally offends me? In a way that it maybe didn’t? Like I still don’t understand Ronald’s experience fully, but I understand it a lot better than I did before. So, if someone was to say something like, I don’t know, was something that people say like Asian people can’t drive or something; before I would be like, “that’s stupid,” don’t say that. Now it’s more like personally offensive.

Chrystal explains how racism now becomes “personally offensive” to her as she is able to empathize with her partner’s experience, and thus extend this knowledge, understanding, and experience to society more generally. Does empathy lead to anti-racist consciousness? In Chrystal’s case it seems to, although she also had the opportunity to become familiar with how race works through her education, training, and experience as a university administrator. Yet she claims that it was only by learning about Ronald’s concrete experiences that she could understand the workings of racism in a more personal and intimate manner. She describes this process as follows, “this gap between experience and to be able to explain it in a certain language that’s also when you think about race in academic contexts, it is a very different vocabulary.”
Chrystal explained that she and Ronald went to the same high school, but as a “normative” white student, she never noticed the undercurrent of racism that was prevalent there until Ronald shared his experiences with her. This made her interrogate her own experience and allowed her to realize how her racial privilege as a white woman protected her from witnessing or experiencing racism. Chrystal describes this process of learning in her own words:

I was like, “what! No … Wait, that’s ridiculous. That doesn’t happen!” and he was like “yeah! It does!” I feel like maybe that is what started it and at first, I think I reacted with denial like, “that doesn’t happen. People here are not racist!” Also, because we went to the same high school, but at different times. He talked about how he had a horrible experience at that high school, which because it was in Maple Ridge, which was very white. And I was like, “what! It was an amazing high school. I had such a great experience there.” And he talked about how he was bullied and all that kind of stuff. And how he didn’t fit in with the group of Korean kids, the very small group that was there. And then he didn’t fit in with the white kids, so he didn’t really have a place. So those were probably the first conversations we started to have … like when we stopped going on dates and having fun all the time and we started having more deeper conversations.

We can glean from Chrystal’s experience how learning from a partner who is a person of colour can help white partners become more aware of their own racial privilege. Through someone else’s eyes individuals can eventually cut through denial and realise the limits of their knowledge of the world due to a racial privilege that shields them from certain experiences (Sullivan, 2006). However, at the same time, cultivating racial literacy for white partners involves considerable work from their non-white partners. For this process to work, they must share their experience in a language that is likely to be understood by their partners who have a completely different experience.

For instance, Chrystal had perceived her high school to be an inclusive space before Ronald shared his experiences of racial exclusion at the same high school that she attended. People of colour must express and explain their experience in a language that is likely to be
understood by their partners. In addition, when they present their experience to their partners, they expose it to their partner’s judgement and denial. Recounting one’s experiences of racialization and making this accessible to their white partners can be emotionally demanding for a non-white partner.

It is possible that such work becomes relatively natural when it happens in the process of getting to know someone in the context of a romantic relationship, and when it is met with understanding and support. Maxine, a white Canadian woman who is in a relationship with Rajesh, an Indian man, asserted that it was easier for her to empathise with his experiences of racism when they became romantically involved. She explained,

If Rajesh and I were just like good friends and not involved romantically, like, yes, I would know about something his culture and would care about it. I wouldn’t necessarily know more than that, like, more details about that because we are intimate, because we are romantic and because we are close, I get more – I’m more invested in these things … This relationship pushed me to do this work like if we can call like my social justice awakening like it definitely pushed me to acknowledge my race, my part in injustice is the benefits I get from colonialism or whatever, right? It has forced me to own up to it in a more public way.

Maxine’s assertion about public acknowledgement of her white privilege falls in line with how romantic intimacy can lead to racial literacy, but at the same time it also raises questions as to why it is so hard to understand someone’s experience without romantic intimacy and emotional attachment.

My interviews with Maxine and others suggest that it is challenging for white people to understand and empathise with experiences of racism that people of colour have. This raises the question of whether racial difference can function as a barrier to communication, which might then be “overcome” through romantic intimacy. In her play De mā føde oss eller pule oss for å elske oss [They must give birth to us or fuck us to love us], Camara Lundestad Joof (2021) asks
whether white people have the capacity to empathise with people of colour if they do not share romantic intimacy or familial relations. In the title of the play, she postulates this as an extreme pronouncement, but leaves open the possibility that intimacy contributes to people’s ability to empathise with others’ experiences, which are beyond their own. People across different spheres of society share their understandings through rational communication, but race is often felt and experienced on the emotional register, which may make it harder for white people to understand the experiences of people of colour without sharing an emotional connection with them.

Romantic intimacy, albeit with high emotional costs for partners of colours might present a way to overcome this barrier in communication, but this is not always the case, and even when empathy can be awakened, there is no guarantee of development of anti-racial consciousness. It is important to highlight that racial literacy is not a solution to the structural problems of racism. At best it offers an insight into possibilities of empathy and understanding across racial lines, and pedagogical practices that could strengthen it. But at worst it could also reduce the problem of racism to relations between individuals (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017).

Racial difference can also be a barrier for understanding and empathy, as the experience of Dina, a white Australian woman with permanent residency in Canada, and her husband Henry, a Black American and Canadian man, suggests. Like the other white female participants I mention earlier, Dina also believed that sharing her life with a Black man helped her realize how different racial histories and realities governed their lives. She explains:

I guess the inter-generational experience of racism and the inter-generational experience of privilege had shaped us in different ways. I remember possibly the first moment that I was really aware of that was there was a blood moon and we drove to the beach to see the moon and there was no parking at the beach. And so, I was like it’s cool, we’ll just park here if there is no parking space and I noticed that Henry was really uncomfortable and really didn’t want to park in the no parking space. And then I think I started to understand
how, where Henry comes from, like his set of personal experiences has taught him that it’s not a good idea to do anything that is likely to attract the attention of law enforcement.

Through media coverage, Dina was aware of the prevalence of anti-Black racist violence among police in North America. But until this moment she had not realised how violence affected the quotidian aspects of everyday life for Black men like her husband. The question remains, how far can awareness and empathy be channeled into anti-racist work and consciousness? Racial literacy through racial intimacy might help white partners to see how race plays out in everyday life as privilege or disadvantage. However, this often demands considerable emotional work from the partner who is a person of colour.

Hemmings (2012) cautions against assuming that feeling can amount to knowing, as empathy does not always translate into understanding and action. She draws on the significance of feeling in the feminist movement for social change. Empathy can help a subject realize the gap between feeling and knowing and this has the potential for building reflexive capacity for resistance. These insights can also be applied to racial intimacy, where empathy can help a subject to develop a reflexive capacity for questioning the social order. However, this is not a given, and sentimental attachment is not a guarantee for genuine engagement and change.

Further, empathetic recognition may not be enough. Hemmings (2012) argues that empathy has political potential, but does not always lead to positive change, and can in fact reinforce hierarchy because it is usually given to those perceived to have less power. Hemmings (2012) states that reflexive politicization may be a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds (p. 158).
Pedwell and Whitehead (2012) claim that empathy has value for political transformation because it acknowledges the significance of embodiment and affect and can be useful to recognize how power works on raced and sexed bodies. However, they caution that to channel its transformative potential, affective responses like empathy must go beyond individual feelings. “When empathy is understood as entailing a process of ‘humanising’ through ‘individualising’, they argue, “it can divert attention away from analysis of wider structures of power which condition transnational encounters” (Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012, p. 122). The key lies in accepting the sociality of emotion, ways in which emotions, though experienced privately, are always socially formed. Who we feel empathy for, and how we experience and express it, are situated in the concrete social structures that we inhabit. Drawing from these discussions, empathy with one’s partner can contribute to political transformation if it is linked to an understanding and engagement with the structures that form the conditions of being. In the case of my participants, empathy must lead to an understanding of prevailing racial hierarchies and their structures, and reflexive capacity to politically engage with them. This is not an automatic leap. In other words, romantic intimacy alone is not enough for developing racial literacy.

A few of my participants made that leap from the individual to the social and were conscious of the complexity of this process. Sandy, a white lesbian woman who is married to Tamara, describes how her intimate partnership with her Black wife affected her race consciousness:

There’s something about an intimate partner relationship that I hope that I don’t – when you don’t have your head up your ass, which I hope I don’t in general – that you get to experience at quite a close, like, I will never know what it’s like, but I feel like it’s the next closest thing not only to witness it, not only to discuss it with her, but also to be around to listen to her talk with other Black folks and other folks of colour, and then to – then layer that on that top of our intimate experience, there is something that is – not everybody has access to, not other white people.
An important element of racial literacy is seeing the routinization of everyday racism and being able to place this in a larger structural context (Twine, 2010). Sandy sums up what it might mean to acquire a double consciousness of racial literacy like the one that Twine (2010) describes. This occurs when a white person gets access to an understanding of what it means to be a Black person or a person of colour in a racialized world. She calls it an “insider’s perspective” and believes that an intimate relationship with a person of colour can raise awareness and help people develop racial consciousness.

Twine and Steinbugler (2006) conceptualize this double consciousness to be akin to Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois, 1903, quoted in Twine & Steinbugler, 2006, p. 15). Writing in the racially segregated socio-political context of the United States, Du Bois has argued that under conditions of racialization it is impossible for the racializing subject (white people) to see the racialized subject (Black people) as full human beings (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015). Since Black people lived in a society dominated by whiteness, they internalize how white see them in addition to their own conceptions of selfhood emerging in context of Blacks society, which Du Bois calls a double consciousness. The whites fail to develop such consciousness because they do not have to engage with the Black world due to their privileged position of dominance (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015). Twine and Steinbugler (2006) consider racial literacy to be a process through which white women develop a double consciousness, which allows them to see their own privilege, and humanise Black people. The double consciousness for white women, they claim, is a form of double vision which enables them to look critically at their own whiteness in context of witnessing everyday instances of racism. At the same time, Sandy acknowledges that this literacy requires that “one does not have one’s head up one’s ass,” by which she means that
white partners must be open, observant, and receptive to learning from one’s shared experience with their partner, which is not always the case. However, Sandy acknowledges that sharing an intimate relationship with a person of colour offers opportunities to bear witness and learn from experiences of racism. Sandy puts it as follows:

My own reflections about race and racism are much more significant being in a mixed-race relationship than I think they might otherwise be. I would like to think that that is not true, that is because just because I’m paying attention, but the truth is that I can’t help, but because what I was referring earlier about watching your intimate partner move to the world in a different skin and having realizations associated with that.

Based on Sandy’s description, one can draw the conclusion that the act of bearing witness might lead one to develop racial literacy when white partners are able to place themselves in their partners’ situations or see the world through their perspectives. This may begin laying the groundwork for understanding racism not only as an individual experience, but as a structural force.

Chad, a white Canadian man, is engaged to be married to Michelle, a Chinese Canadian woman, who is also his colleague at work. In our interview, Chad admitted how being with her has made him reflect on his own privilege. He said,

I’m recognized more than Michelle. I think that out of being a white male makes it easier when you are a manager, for you to get noticed and it’s really frustrating to see that and to see someone not get that same recognition and it happens everywhere, I think.

It appears that Chad is able to read the situation in terms of how their chances of promotion and success in the workplace are affected by racial structures. As a white man, Chad can get more recognition for his efforts than Michelle, even when they work in the same capacity in the same organization. Michelle has worked there longer than he has, but both acknowledge that he gets more recognition for his efforts. Chad can place their experience in a broader context...
of structural racism in society. However, Chad prefaced his reflections by defending himself as a hard-working employee and by mentioning that this was just his impression, and he had no concrete evidence. His response suggests that while he acknowledges the racial discrimination his partner faces in their common workplace, it is hard for him to accept his privilege and how this translates into his professional success.

Rick, also a white Canadian man, is married to Ligaya, who migrated to Canada from the Philippines. He recalls witnessing many occasions in which she was treated very differently from him in everyday experiences. When Ligaya first drew his attention to these differences, he was skeptical. While they were on a trip to Amsterdam, she made him see things in a different light. He explains:

We flew to Europe, we landed in Amsterdam, and she had a Filipino passport at that time, now she has a Canadian passport but for me with my Canadian passport was, “Oh, welcome Mr. Rick,” almost no questions asked, but then she was right beside me. And they were grilling her, question after question … “What is the purpose of your trip, who is paying for your trip, and how long are you planning on staying” and all this. It took us a few minutes to get her through customs. And they probably would not have let her in if it were not for me being with her, even though she had a visa … I supposed these experiences would not have happened if she were a white Canadian.

Rick explains that he is aware of the prevalence of racism in Canadian society, but he did not think it could affect the everyday life of middle-class people like Ligaya. As he put it, he could better understand why she relied on him for dealing with certain public institutions, as she was more attuned to how his white privilege could work as a form of capital to their advantage in that situation. Twine (2010) described how white mothers deployed their whiteness to negotiate advantageously on behalf of their mixed children. Although Rick encouraged Ligaya to assert herself, his cultivated awareness made him more willing to see things from her perspective. In
our interview, he recognized his privileged position in a racial hierarchy and discussed how he could use it as a resource to support his wife.

4.2 Struggles with Racial Literacy: When Empathy is Challenged by Evidence

Importantly, not all white partners were able to draw on the experiences of their partners to develop racial literacy. Some even rejected the experience and explanations that their partners presented them with. In this section I examine the white women and men in my study who struggled to empathize with their partners and had difficulty cultivating racial literacy. Some white partners did not recognize or acknowledge racism. Others disagreed with and minimized the existence of racial inequality by diminishing the experiences of their partner, or by denying their own racial privilege, or both. I pay close attention to the different strategies that white people used to defend their views, especially when they were contradicted by their partners’ concerns or experiences. As I discuss in this section, not everyone used these strategies in the same way, and there is a difference of degree and articulation.

In some cases, white men in my study questioned, challenged, and disagreed with their partner’s views and experience of racism. Some insisted that their own views and approaches were more objective. White women also struggled with supporting their partners, but none of the white female participants in my study were unable or unwilling to acknowledge their partner’s experience or offer empathy. It appears white women were more willing to engage with their partners’ experience and offer support even when they struggled with it. White men in my study found it more challenging to learn from their partners’ experiences with racism.

For example, Mark and Meera have been married for over 27 years and have three children together. They both immigrated to Canada from the United Kingdom. Meera is born in the United Kingdom but identifies as South Asian, whereas Mark is also born in the United
Kingdom and is white and English. During our interview, Meera described a number of incidents where she felt she was treated differently due to her South Asian heritage. But her husband Mark reacted to her experiences with skepticism because he was not present to observe the interactions first-hand. Mark framed his skepticism in terms of his desire to be “as objective as a scientist.” However, in doing so he denied his wife’s experiences of racism. For example, Meera described one incident when they tried to sell their house in the United Kingdom. When the buyer saw pictures of Meera, he left abruptly. Their property dealer told them that the buyers were not willing to buy a “Brown” house, and the chances of selling the house would be better if they removed Meera’s pictures for the next showing. Mark and Meera did this, and they sold their house shortly thereafter. Mark said he was not the one who spoke to the property dealer, and though he acknowledged that they did take her pictures down and she was not present during the showing, he did not support Meera’s assertions of racism. Instead, he repeated his inability to confirm what happened. In the individual interview, I asked him several direct questions about the incident. He said:

I wasn’t there when the conversation took place, so I only know like second-hand. Yeah, yes, I understood that. It was … it was an unfortunate, but necessary thing to do. Yeah. I just didn’t expect many people to have the attitude while buying a house, possibly. It was, it was sad. It was sad that people could think like that.

In his statement, Mark claimed that he could not confirm Meera’s suspicions or feelings, but at the same time he acknowledged that when they did remove her pictures, they were able to sell the house. During our interview, Mark said that he avoids having conversations about race with Meera:

I suppose often like playing devil’s advocate, she feels attacked and she attacks back, and I feel attacked for voicing my opinion, and that’s unpleasant. That’s the reason we don’t usually … I have a less emotive approach to understanding things. At least I’d like to think
so. Like I’d say what about the alternative possibility, like X Y Z, but it typically doesn’t go down very well. I often feel unheard, and as you said, it’s hard to blame myself, looking at the evidence, and trying to arrive at the best possible conclusion, and often acknowledging there is no conclusion.

Mark’s expression of a “difference of opinion” stems from his desire to find alternate explanations to racism. He became especially uncomfortable when the explanations of racism offered by Meera raised questions about his white privilege. As he put it, “it’s hard to blame myself.”

Research has shown that acknowledging white privilege is challenging for some. White people may react by denying their unfair advantage and by minimizing experiences of people of colour who experience racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fultz & Kondrat, 2018). Often white people perceive themselves as being under attack from people of colour, especially when the latter point to the racial privilege that whiteness brings. White people often describe themselves as victims of reverse racism. DiAngelo (2011) has used the term white fragility to account for the ostensible stress that white people face when they are asked to confront their race privilege. She defines white fragility as follows:

[A] state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (p. 54)

Mark’s behaviour, especially his refusal to have any conversations about race with Meera, may be interpreted as an expression of “white fragility.” Mark finds conversations where he may be confronted with his own racial privilege to be stress-inducing.

Meera felt Mark’s desire to avoid conversations about race with her stemmed from his belief that she was “hypersensitive about this stuff.” Mark preferred to find an alternative
explanation that would deflect the possibility that race could be a factor. For example, Meera described an incident where she felt she was racialized and verbally assaulted. She was waiting at a bank when a white man yelled at her because he thought she wasn’t waiting her turn in a queue. According to Meera, the man told her: “Your people need to wait their turn.” Meera described this as racism, but Mark did not read the situation this way. Meera reflected:

And I tried to explain that to Mark because he will just say, well it was just a joke, and he could have said that to anyone. No, he didn’t say to anyone, he didn’t say it to the white man that was there with me. He said it to me, and no he didn’t call me a Paki or anything specific, but it was very clear that he picked on me, the only person of colour in the room, and he felt totally entitled to bully and shout at me.

In the individual interview, when I met alone with Meera, she explained Mark’s reactions, as follows:

He tends to do that, when he brings up a problem that I say has a systemic element, he is more likely to go to an individual and personalized response of it that seeing the structure of systemic [racism]. “Oh, that person is just having a bad day” or, “that’s just typical” kind of very individualistic response.

The idea of racial literacy is based on the capacity of an individual to tie their individual racial encounters with race as a social structure. In this case, Mark’s inability or unwillingness to see Meera’s experiences as a manifestation of racism as a structural force made it hard for him to develop racial literacy.

Mark’s responses to Meera can also be understood through his desire to continue “looking at the alternative possibility” and his efforts to be “less emotive,” as he explained in our interview. But Meera felt that Mark was not willing to accept her experiences as encounters with racism because it was not obviously racist and did not include explicit racist speech. Research has shown that everyday micro-aggressions can be as harmful and can contribute as much
towards institutional racism as more overt forms of racism (Embrick et al., 2017). But Mark did not view these micro-aggressions as racist. Meera’s experience was indeed a racist encounter, but due to lack of explicit racist speech, Mark did not validate her interpretation of it. On multiple occasions, Mark did not accept Meera’s accounts and experiences of racism because of the “lack of objective evidence,” as he put it.

Mark did eventually accept that race could have played a part in the way they had to erase his wife’s presence when they were selling their house, but he did so reluctantly, only after I prodded him during our interview. He circled around the event, citing his absence from the meeting with the realtor, being pushed to remove the pictures for the sake of selling the house, and expressed his surprise at being confronted by racism, before settling on the possibility of the role race may have had to play in this instance. His reluctance to acknowledge the significance of race and racism in this case further highlights his desire to search for an alternative explanation, even when it is hard to sustain under scrutiny. Mark explained that the reason he did not recognize these encounters as racist is because, “My perspective, I am basically blind to that wouldn’t … did never occur to me that somebody would have that reaction because I don’t necessarily see colour.” Mark emphasized his inability to register the role of race in such cases because he was colour blind. Research has shown that the colour blindness thesis is often used by white people to minimize the significance of race and racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, Burke, 2017). Whiteness is treated as the normative race, and white people are not disadvantaged by their race, which makes it easier for them to support colour blindness and avoid recognizing their racial privilege and the racial hierarchy in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, Burke, 2017, Childs, 2005). This is evident in the responses that Mark gave to me during our interview.
Yancy (2012) draws on his own experience of teaching about anti-racism in a university, and his white students reactions to him, argues that white people often react to people of colours’ experiences of racism with hesitation and disbelief. The reason for this is that people of colour often experience and practice “epistemic contiguity,” which is “a form of familiar and embodied entanglement or an intimately shared social integument through which our racial identities are shaped, as opposed to a form of ‘epistemic distanciation’” (Yancy, 2012, p. 156), which white people prefer. He describes this tendency as a “distancing strategy” on the part of whites (p. 153). This strategy is implemented by challenging the epistemic status or the objectivity of the person of colour and their capacity to know when an act is racist. The goal of this strategy is to avoid being associated with systemic racism.

One way of articulating this strategy is by labelling the person of colour as “too emotional,” and thus doubting their version of truth. Yancy (2012) describes his interaction with a white male professor with whom he shared his experience of being racialized:

The white male professor’s response, though, was not one of empathetic identification or trust; rather, it functioned as a form of dismissal. For him, I was simply angry, my judgment was clouded, and therefore my philosophical observations were nugatory. It was about my anger, my inability to discard cumbersome and misplaced (perhaps even fabricated) charged emotions that for him were clearly the real problems. (p. 153)

I find Yancy’s account to be similar to Meera’s experience with Mark, who was unable to offer her “empathetic identification or trust.” However, he is Meera’s partner with whom she has an intimate relationship. This is very different from the white male professor who was Yancy’s professional colleague. Drawing on these accounts, I would contend that refusal of “empathetic identification or trust” from a romantic partner could be quite hurtful. The risk of such hurt combined with the work of sharing personal experiences with racism to educate their white partners places a disproportionate emotional burden on partners of colour.
Claims about lack of evidence was a common strategy through which white partners minimized the significance of race and white privilege. Earlier I shared a narrative about Chad and Michelle, who both worked in the housing industry. Michelle had worked there longer than Chad and had more experience, but Chad received more recognition for this work. In the couple interview, they both agreed it may have something to do with Chad’s identity as a white man. However, when asked whether he was treated differently due to his racial status at his workplace, Chad said, “who knows if there is some sort of relationship between what my outward appearance is and how that could have benefited me. It’s hard to say, there is no empirical evidence.” I would argue that Chad was willing to accept that, due to his racial privilege, he had an unfair advantage at work over his fiancé Michelle. However, he tried to minimise its impact by pointing out that there is no “empirical evidence.” Thus, he was less willing to see himself as a privileged white man with unearned advantages in the workspace.

Some of my participants focused on the level of the individual, as a way to downplay race. This came up in my interviews with Ralph, a white British man who was engaged to Katy, a Chinese-Canadian woman. Katy discussed an incident in Vancouver where people were putting up posters anonymously warning white people about the growing power of the Chinese community in Richmond. Katy was concerned about rising anti-Asian racism in Vancouver, but Ralph had a different take on it:

I look at things is a little differently, I am more pragmatic, I would say. I analyze and understand things. Katy can very often react to the shock factor … obviously, I can recognize that if you are a non-white background, then it is obviously more alarming.

Although Ralph recognized that Katy’s had a stronger reaction to the posters due to the fact that she was Chinese and thus the object of the posters, he attributed her reactions to her tendency to become emotional. He described his own response to be “more pragmatic” and objective.
According to Shields (2013), the Western model of thinking portrays emotion as the antithesis of reason, which means being emotional can impact the assessment of a person’s rationality. In this case, Ralph sees Katy’s opinion as less rooted in rationality. He presents his own reaction as fairer and more reliable, perhaps because of his whiteness and maleness, which are often associated with reason and rationality. Shields (2013) argues that socially circulating beliefs about men and women’s relationship to emotion affect how we judge them. Women are seen as more emotional and less rational than men.

In our interview, Ralph attempted to explain these posters in terms of an individualized act. He said:

Somebody is going around putting those things up, but also it could be just a very ignorant person. Just by putting up the posters we can’t say that he has an ulterior motive that he wants to murder all people from non-white backgrounds or make those kinds of assumptions. Yes, it is definitely wrong what he is doing, his beliefs are wrong and it is concerning what he is doing, but jumping to conclusions because sometimes people do like to stir the pot, do those kind of things, so that is why I suppose I look at things more pragmatically than just reacting to the actual thing that just happened actually doesn’t change that fact, and getting kind of upset and angry about it, which doesn’t change the fact that it happened, but in understanding the why and what can be done about that when we understand those things and that is the kind of way I think about things.

Ralph is not denying that what happened was wrong, and he recognizes the validity of his partner’s reaction and empathizes with it. Yet he believes the emotional distance of his own approach is the appropriate way of confronting the issue.

What is visible in Ralph’s approach is his tendency to reduce a racist act to a bad individual action, divorced from history and from a wider racial context. The act of printing and putting up posters warning white people of the increasing power of the Chinese community in Vancouver is not just an expression of resentment by a misguided individual; it is a racist act that
reflects, encourages, and maintains white supremacy. The posters in question stated the following:

Step aside, whitey! The Chinese are taking over! So, you can now enjoy the ‘privilege’ of being marginalized in the community your forefathers built, have neighbours who refuse to speak your language, and not be able to afford a home! (Slattery, 2016)

These posters claim that white people as a group are being threatened by Chinese people presenting them as foreigners to Canada and omitting the fact that many Canadian citizens living in Vancouver, and more specifically Richmond, are also of Chinese descent. This statement ties whiteness to Canadian identity and the rise of status and power among another racial group is presented as a threat to Canadian society. Ralph’s efforts to reduce these posters to an individual act ignores the historical and contemporary prevalence of anti-Chinese racism in Vancouver. It also focuses on their intentions instead of recognizing the impact of these words.

Ralph’s response can be understood through DiAngelo’s (2011) theorisation of white fragility. She describes one of the factors shaping whites’ response towards racial stress as universalism and individualism. She argues that whites tend to think of their perspective as universal or objective and apply this to all human experiences. This discourse of universalism is attached to individualism:

The discourse of universalism functions similarly to the discourse of individualism but instead of declaring that we all need to see each other as individuals (everyone is different), the person declares that we all need to see each other as human beings (everyone is the same). (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 59)

This allows one to deny the significance of race, and the advantages it confers on white people. This can help to elucidate the responses of my white male participants, like Mark and Ralph, who emphasized individual and personality-related factors, to explain away racism. They were
unwilling to see race as a structural force distributing privilege and disadvantage to maintain a racial hierarchy because it would threaten their own positions of power. I discuss the difference between white men and women’s reactions and the possible explanations for it later in this chapter.

Two things become clear from these examples. Some white men looked for an alternative explanation and pursued it even when it was hard to sustain. They also looked at racism as an expression of individual ignorance or hostility, which allowed them to downplay or minimize their partner’s concerns and experiences. In both cases, white men also believed they had a less emotional and more analytical approach, which was based on evidence, in contrast to their partners, who according to them were more inclined to be emotional.

In my interviews with women of colour who had white partners, I noticed that these women placed a high value on their emotions, as their experience of race was tied to their feelings. They said that they “felt race.” When Meera recollected her experience at the bank, she described these terms:

There’s something around interactions where people don’t necessarily say stuff, but there’s a deep knowing when it’s racialized, right? There’s a feeling you have that this is not just someone being rude, but they don’t like me for the colour of my skin, or my gender, or they think I’m queer, or whatever it is, right? We know that when I feel this. There’s a quantitative difference around that interaction that you can just feel it energetically.

Meera claims that she knew when she was being racialized because she could feel it. Her way of knowing was intuitive and based on her body and on affect. This made it even harder for her to communicate this to her husband or others. She felt she was racialized, but her husband Mark doubted her interpretation of facts because she did not have any “objective evidence” that could convince him. In the process he failed to offer her empathy making it even harder for her to share her experiences with him.
4.3 Limits of Empathy: The Cost of Being an Agent of Racial Literacy

Racial literacy tends to focus on white people who have access to experiences of racism through their partners of colour and who can supposedly learn from these experiences to be more racially aware. Racial literacy does not focus on people of colour and how the experience of racism and literacy affects them. Twine (2010) has opined that racial consciousness is raised by moments of epiphany when race and one’s own racialization is realized. She claims that interaction with “agents of epiphany” leads to race awareness and that these moments are often experienced with intimate others. She asserts, “Agents of epiphany, prompt those around them to rethink the meanings of race, racism, and antiracism, and thereby to change how they live their lives” (Twine, 2010, p. 253). However, these agents of epiphany, when they are people of colour as intimate others, must engage in emotional and other forms of labour to contribute to raising awareness of their white partners.

For instance, in our interview, Ligaya talked about her husband’s reaction to her experiences of racism:

In the beginning Rick would say, “Oh maybe it’s just in your mind,” or whatever, which makes me mad. “You don’t know how it is.” I’m so dramatic, so, “You don’t know how it is to walk in my shoes” and things like that.

However, Ligaya explained that when Rick witnessed her experiences, they resonated with him, and he was willing to empathize with her in the process of developing racial literacy. Part of this process, sharing experiences and convincing one’s partner of its validity, can be stressful and exhausting for people of colour. Often their efforts to explain their experiences are not met with recognition and empathy from their white partners.
In Meera’s case, she felt that she did not want to take on the “teacher role” for her husband, who was constantly questioning her experiences. She found her attempts to explain her feelings to him to be emotionally exhausting. She explained:

Mark said he really avoids conversations around race. Actually, I think that did surprise me a little bit. Mark has a little bit of awareness and that he chooses to opt out of the conversation. But what was sad is he doesn’t realize how hurtful or harmful that is to me.

Meera and Mark have been married a long time and she knew that Mark explicitly avoided conversations around race and racism. This came up in the couples’ interview where he made it very clear that these conversations made him uncomfortable, and he felt personally attacked as a white man. Meera was disappointed by his reaction, and in the individual interview I had with her she expressed how his refusal to engage with such difficult conversations affected her. In her individual interview with me, she described his behaviour as “hurtful and harmful.” By avoiding conversations about race, Mark continued to exercise his racial privilege.

Meera felt Mark’s avoidance of these conversations had to do with his inability to understand her experiences. She believed that his race and gender privilege contributed to this. It was hard for one person to accept another’s experience, Meera, explained, even when they were in an interracial relationship, and especially when it meant recognizing their own privileges:

I think the reason it’s hard that this intimate level is it’s hard enough for white people or for men to commit with the guilt they feel about the privilege they have, despite the fact that they didn’t ask for it, they just have it, right? But, yeah, it’s in the same way around race as it is around gender. It makes people deeply uncomfortable about the privilege … I guess, for me, if you’re in an interracial relationship, well, in – just in a – in a heterosexual relationship, as a man, if you – if you care about the person you’re with, you love them and they tell you that they experienced the world in this sexist, misogynistic way, do you say, “well, just because I don’t have that experience, that’s not real.”
Meera saw a parallel between how male privilege and white privilege worked in interracial heterosexual relationships to uphold hierarchies of race and gender. She experienced Mark’s need to defend himself and his racial and gender privilege as a form of refusal to see things from her perspective or to empathize with her experience.

Mark refused to acknowledge his own racial and gender privilege, and Meera’s firmness in articulating her experiences with racism made him feel attacked. In the process Mark diminished Meera’s experiences, causing her “harm and hurt.” He denied his male and white privilege and how it worked in his relationship with Meera. Meera explained his reaction in the following terms:

We’ve progressed a long line in terms of race relations, gender, and stuff like that. So, when I bring this up, I think he feels that I’m bringing up stuff when really, it’s not that bad anymore. Gender isn’t that bad anymore. Race isn’t that bad anymore. I think his always sort of minimized or dismissed somewhat of my experience, because he thinks it’s part of my job and I exaggerate it.

Meera’s explanation here captures a very important tendency by those privileged by the prevailing structures of racial hierarchy to downplay the claims of those who are disadvantaged by the same structures. This language delegitimizes voices of critique by citing the supposed progress experienced by women and people of colour over the past few decades and by suggesting that Western societies have already reached a point where oppression based on race and gender has been overcome (Bridges, 2021; Sullivan, 2017). Bridges (2021) claims that white men respond to a social space where racial and gender privilege have become increasingly visible by developing modes of hybrid hegemonic masculinities that creatively resist their identification with white and male privilege and secure and obscure their position of power in society.
Mark does not deny that patriarchy and racism may exist in the world, but he denies its relevance to his own life and in his relationship with Meera. In fact, Meera suggests it is because of his gender and racial privilege that he is dismissive of her experiences of being racialized. In his individual interview, I asked Mark to reflect on his relationship to white and male privilege, and he explained his position accordingly:

I don’t think there is white privilege in our relationship. I think she gets what she wants more often. If I get my way, it’s in a very different way, but she will get her way by pushing. It’s just that’s just a question of style, it’s not necessarily related to race at all … No, I don’t think I have male privilege. [Laughs] I’m really sorry, but it’s true. I look at relationships where there are very traditional male-female gender roles with envy I think, I think its envy … that they can get away with it. I can’t, not only because it’s not right, but I’ll probably not get away with it.

Mark uses what Bridges (2021) calls “discursive distancing” to defend his position as a white male in a context where racial and gender privilege is made visible. Based on her study of white men engaged in anti-feminist and pro-feminist activism, Bridges (2021) claims that white men try to minimise their own role as occupying positions of dominance in society, by either pointing out how they are stigmatized by assuming their privilege or disidentifying themselves from white men who dominate women. In this case, Mark uses both these discursive strategies. He feels that Meera’s insistence on talking about race and gender is an attack on him “for being a white guy.”

Mark also separates himself from other white men who have traditional marriages and dominate their wives. Bridges (2021) calls this form of masculinity a hybrid masculinity that attempts “to secure and obscure positions of power” (p. 665). I would argue that Mark uses these discursive strategies of distancing to deny both his race and gender privilege. He believes that since his wife Meera is an assertive and empowered woman in the context of their relationship as a couple, his racial and gender privilege does not play a significant role between them. However,
such an interpretation considers their relationship to be a bubble existing outside of the social sphere marked by hierarchies of race and gender. The very fact that Mark can claim that he is “racially blind” and refuse to engage in conversation when Meera discusses her experiences of race highlights his racial privilege. His inability to understand Meera’s experience stems from his inability to see his own privilege.

Sullivan (2006) has argued that white people often are ignorant of their own privilege because they are used to inhabiting a world where their racial privilege is not challenged. She calls this the habit of ignorance, which benefits and supports the domination of white people and white privilege. Such a habit limits their ability to understand oppression faced by others due to their own racial privilege. She calls this “white solipsism” (Sullivan, 2006; p. 25), which gives white people a predisposition to go through the world without needing to understand or acknowledge that others do not have the same opportunities for inhabiting cultural and social worlds as they do. In the context of knowledge production, Bhambra (2017) describes this as “methodological whiteness.” This is a position in which white people are not able to see how their privileged location has limited their ability to perform a neutral analysis. Mark’s inability to see his own privilege vis-à-vis Meera’s experiences appears to be an instantiation of a white habit of ignorance supported by white solipsism. The habits of white privilege according to Sullivan (2006) “can often be defense mechanisms by which one protects oneself from perceived dangers and conflicts, the protection often including avoidance of conscious self-examination” (p. 42).

Being able to understand another person’s experience, a point that Meera raised, also has a philosophical and affective dimension, as language is often limited and cannot fully communicate intimate experiences. As my other participants shared, communication is not
always met with understanding. For example, Amber, a white lesbian woman who is partnered with Roq, a Black woman, explains:

> What is frustrating for me is that there’s, like, a couple of things, like, I want to be good, like, person. And so – and I do a lot of work around this. And so, I think I feel especially vulnerable around those criticisms because I want to be – I want to get my gold star and have the cookie. And so that understanding that, like, I will never get there, like, I think it’s kind of this journey and I – but it’s constant. It’s constant unlearning and unpacking the power that I have. And that’s kind of a painful place to land. There’s going to be, like, constant discomfort.

White partners’ efforts to cultivate racial literacy meant they had to be willing to accept that racial literacy is not a state one can reach and stop working toward after getting there. Rather, it involves persistent labour, and can be hard to accept by white partners. Amber is willing to work hard to acquire racial literacy, but she wants her efforts to be recognized and show results. This also reflects her position of racial privilege where she expects rewards for the work she is doing as a white woman.

> Yancy (2012) points out that there is a tendency amongst white people to avoid discussions of race and racism and to express a desire to move beyond to a place where difference and oppression can be overcome. He describes this tendency as “wanting to dash to the future at once” (Yancy, 2012, p. 158). Yancy (2012) argues that the real work is not in the imaginary, but rather

> the unfinished present is where I want whites to tarry (though not permanently remain), to listen, to recognize the complexity and weight of the current existence of white racism, to attempt to understand the ways in which they perpetuate racism, and to begin to think about the incredible difficulty involved in undoing it. (p. 158)

Amber describes the work of cultivating racial literacy as being in a state of “constant discomfort.” I would argue that Amber is struggling with this need to inhabit the future, but she
is willing to acknowledge how difficult it is and is motivated to remain in it even when it causes her “constant discomfort.” Racial literacy requires constant work from both the partners. However, in practice this often ends up being one sided where partners of colour bear a disproportionate emotional burden through sharing their experiences with their white partner to help them see the effect of race in their lives. This makes partners of colour vulnerable to skepticism from their white partners as I discussed earlier.

One does not suddenly become racially literate but develops the ability to practice racial literacy over time. It is a process which requires constant commitment and action. In most cases, white partners did not talk about the challenge their partners of colour may have faced when they discussed issues of racial privilege with them. One exception was Sandy. Her wife Tamara, a Black woman, felt it was a shame that Sandy, as a white woman, could not be with her in spaces that were exclusively for people of colour. Sandy, on the other hand, did not feel excluded in such situations, but felt it was necessary to have spaces just for people of colour where they didn’t have to do the labour of making white people aware. She said, “why folks of colour want to have gatherings like that is because they don’t want to be bothered doing the emotional labour that constantly has to be done with white people to either explain themselves and/or make white people feel better about being a jerk.” Sandy was able to understand how being in a space where people of colour related to each other’s experiences was not excluding white people like her, but offering people of colour a break from the emotional labour of explaining themselves and cultivating racial literacy for white people. White female participants in my study expressed more readiness and ability to empathise with their partners experience than white men. I would argue this difference can be explained by focusing on how race and gender intersect with each other producing specific forms and experiences of marginalization. But Sandy was the only
participant in my study who made direct reference to the work people of colour had to do to make white people develop racial consciousness.

In contrast to white women, white men who participated in my study were skeptical of accounts of their female partners of colours claiming to apply a more objective and unemotional approach to the subject at hand. Often white men did not trust their partners’ interpretation of an event or experience because it they believed it was grounded in emotions. The label of “being too emotional” is used strategically to dismiss or discredit the experiences and claims of women (Hochschild, 2012; Shields, 2013). Shields (2013) cautions us from essentializing stereotypical ideas about the relationship between gender and emotions. However, she also contends that these ideas circulate in society and affect how men and women make sense of their and others’ behaviours, abilities, and thoughts. By claiming that women are more emotional than men, women’s experiences are often dismissed as not being credible or rational enough (Shields, 2013). The white male partners used a similar reasoning to question their partners’ reactions as emotional. On contrary, white female partners engaged with their partners’ assessment of how race and racism played out in social situations.

Women are also more used to performing emotional labour3 (Hochschild, 2012). Hochschild (2012) has connected women’s ability and need to perform emotional labour to their subordinate gender status vis-à-vis men, and their limited access to power and resources. As she puts it, “lacking other resources, women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the material resources they lack” (Hochschild, 2012, p. 163). I will underline

3 Hochschild (2012) uses emotional labour to mean “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has an exchange value” (p. 7). She also uses the term for such actions in the private sphere. I use the term more broadly based on her discussion of hidden costs women go through when they cater to others’ feelings and enhance their status.
that the female partners in my study did not necessarily lack financial resources and most of them were independently employed often in better paying jobs than their male partners. However, I broadly agree with Hochschild’s analysis that the capacity to do emotional work is often gendered by social norms and expectations that likely contributed to female partners’ willingness and ability to empathise with their partners of colour offer them understanding and support. Hochschild (2012) asserts that while women are more adept at emotional work – that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others (...) men in general have not been trained to make their emotions a resource and are therefore less likely to develop their capacity for managing feeling. (p. 165)

Hochschild’s (2012) argument is that women are expected to embrace the needs of others more than men, and that I believe could explain why women in my study have been more empathetic than men towards their partners’ experiences. Hochschild (2012) has linked the ability to manage one’s own emotions and catering to the emotional needs of others to one’s subordinate status in society, and she has focused on gender and class arguing that women and lower-class people are more adept at such emotional labour, which is expected of them from society. I would extend this analysis to race and argue that people of colour are often expected to manage the feelings of white people and make them comfortable, especially when they are presented with discomforting realities of race and racism. Mark and Meera’s case in my study illustrates this well. Further, Hochschild (2012) claims that:

A person of lower status has a weaker claim to the right to define what is going on; less trust is placed in her judgements, and less respect is accorded to what she feels. Relatively speaking, it more often becomes the burden of women, as with other lower-status persons, to uphold a minority viewpoint, a discredited opinion. (p. 173)
I agree with Hochschild’s analysis of how difference in power and status shapes everyday interactions between men and women, and, I would argue, can also be applied to interactions between white people and people of colour when it comes to interpreting what is going on in a social situation. This could explain the tension that arises when women of colour interpret their experiences in terms of race and racism, while their white male partners discredit their viewpoints, thus denying them the power to define their own experiences as encounters with racism.

Historically, white supremacist discourses have often constructed race and gender as innate differences placed in a hierarchy, and the domination of whiteness is maintained by a racist and misogynist discourse (Ferber, 1998). The superiority of white men over people of colour and women was linked to a natural order of things. Parasram (2019) has argued that right-wing ideologies that would reinforce the old order based on racial and gender inequality are attractive to white men in Canada because white fragility is compounded by the crisis of white masculinity. He further argues that white supremacy and patriarchy support each other as systems of hierarchy and marginalization. In this context one can understand the resistance shown by white men to empathise with the experiences shared by their female partners. The responses of white men and women differed significantly in terms of their ability and willingness to empathise with their partners experiences of racism. Spanierman et al. (2012), in their study on the difference between white male and female university students’ responses to affirmative action, found that white women were more willing to recognise structural racism and support affirmative action to address it than were men. They use a typology they develop based on similar research on the difference between white women’s and men’s ability to empathise with people of colour and recognise structural racism. They call this typology *racial affect types*, and
it classifies white people in categories of oblivious, empathetic but unaccountable, anti-racist, and insensitive and afraid (Spanierman et al., 2012, p. 177). White women are more likely than men to be in anti-racist type and white men are more likely to be in insensitive and afraid type. They theorise that the reason for this could be that white men experience male privilege in addition to racial privilege, and their socialisation and experience of power and entitlement makes it harder for them to accept an explanation about the world which could impact their position of privilege (Spanierman et al., 2012, p. 175). On one hand, this ties into Hochschild’s theory of gendered difference between the abilities of men and women to perform emotional labour and explains the contrast between responses of white male and female participants in my study. White women were more able to empathise with their partners experience of racism and less likely to dismiss, minimise, or deny that experience unlike white men. On the other hand, this contrast between white men and women can be understood through the lens of feminist theory of multiple masculinities (Collins, 1987; Collins & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Connell’s (1987) theory of multiple masculinities explains the domination of men over women through concentration of social power, as well as hierarchies between men. She used the concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe the cultural ideal (or ideals) of masculinity, which exercise power through cultural dominance (Connell, 1987). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) refined the concept to state that “hegemonic masculinity need not be the commonest pattern in the everyday lives of boys and men. Rather, hegemony works in part through the production of exemplars of masculinity (e.g., professional sports stars), symbols that have authority even though most men and boys do not fully live up to them” (p. 846). Hegemonic masculinity supports both the hierarchy of masculinities within men, and the broader dominance of men over women legitimizing both patriarchy and the subordination of alternative masculinities. Connell
(1987) described the emergence of different forms of femininities in response to hegemonic masculinity. Although women often resist the patriarchal dominance of masculinity over them, many adapt to its dominance by developing a form of emphasized femininity described as “an adaptation to men’s power, and emphasizing compliance, nurturance and empathy as womanly virtues” (Connell, 1987, p. 188). Drawing on Connell’s (1987) theory of masculinities, I would argue that the white men’s inability to empathise with their female partners, and white women’s empathetic identification with their male partners can be understood in the larger context of interplay between masculinities and femininities in heterosexual relationships.

Mahtani (2014) argues that whiteness does not always protect white women from misogyny. It is useful to think about white privilege in more complex ways without assuming that all white people have the same relation to privilege. Thus, Mahtani (2014) places emphasis on class and gender as ways of exploring how white privilege works in practice. I would argue that the experience of gender disadvantage may help white people empathise with experiences of racial oppression. This opens possibilities new forms of alliances (Mahtani, 2014). Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2006) also found working-class white women to be potential allies to people of colour. However, such alliances cannot be assumed. Twine’s (2010) study shows how a number of white women used gender oppression to deflect questions about their own racial privilege and complicity.

4.4 Parenting and the Potential and Limits of Racial Literacy

In Twine’s (2010) study, the concept of racial literacy is based on the experiences of white women mothering children they have with Black fathers. She is particularly interested in how they become conscious about the role of race in society through their efforts to raise transracial families and to develop close emotional bonds with the Black community. These mothers, when
not shielded by class privileges, faced rebound racism themselves, she explains, and often learnt about their own racial privilege and how they could use it to help their children navigate a racialized social system. Furthermore, they had to teach their children to face, name, and resist racial oppression. The need to educate their children about race and racism in society also taught many of these white mothers about racial literacy. However, not everyone developed racial literacy, and many of them failed to see their own complicity in the racial system that upheld white privilege. Thus, the possibility of developing racial literacy through interracial intimacy or the scope of racial literacy for confronting racism is limited.

Studies on transracial adoption by white parents (Dorow, 2006; Kubo, 2010) have reported that adopting children of a different race into families does not mean white parents are able to address the salience of race and racism in society. Transracial adoption practices also reproduced racial hierarchies and practices and the problem of racial difference was often reduced to manageable cultural differences which many believed could be overcome by cultivating cultural learning and appreciation (Dorow, 2006; Kubo, 2010). Dorow (2006) argues that experiences of raising adopted children of a different race did push some white parents into confronting everyday racism. However, it is unclear how far these parents could go in connecting with broader structures of racism.

In Twine’s (2010, p. 259) study, she suggested that the chances of a white mother to develop racial literacy are affected by the racial consciousness of her partner. In my dissertation, I focus on how and to what extent racial literacy can be cultivated by white partners through sharing and witnessing the experiences of their partners and learning from them. I asked couples in the study about raising children as an interracial couple. Only six out of twenty-nine couples participating in my study had children. Two of these had grown-up children, while four others
had younger children who lived with them. All the couples with children were heterosexual. I asked the couples in my study, including those who did not have children, what they thought about raising children together as an interracial couple and raising children in a multiracial family. A few of them clearly said that they did not want to have children, but even they reflected on raising multiracial children in a mixed family.

My dissertation did not focus on the act of parenting or on the emotional work of care giving to children as a catalyst for racial literacy. However, in the course of my interviews some of the participants acknowledged the role of race and racialization in parenting mixed race children. Responses ranged from those who felt there was no need to talk to children about race, to those who insisted on the importance of teaching their children about racial inequality in society and the need to fight against it. For instance, Elizabeth, who is a multiracial woman with Indian and white background, and her husband Otis, who is white American, were raising their five-year-old son at the time of the interview. They discussed his interactions with race as follows:

Otis: He doesn’t see race. He knows that there are people from China, and he knows that Elizabeth’s mother is from India but-

Elizabeth: He does not really see race, and I try I notice how much I do talk about race and I have tried to not so much because I feel like that is going to shape him in a way that maybe it is not fair to a kid, like, why do we want to make them see this so soon.

Elizabeth and Otis did not want to name race in their everyday conversations because they did not want their son to be aware of it “so soon.” Elizabeth talked about how hard it was to avoid naming people’s cultural background or race in everyday conversation, but she wanted to avoid it so her son would not learn to point out people’s racial differences. Although she was aware of how much racial thinking permeated everyday life, she wanted to minimise its impact on her son for as long as possible. Their response stems from a sense of childhood innocence. They believed
that talking about race with their son was best avoided. They explained that they did not want him to be too attached to racial labels when describing people.

At another point in our conversation, Elizabeth mentioned that her sister had a hard time reconciling her Indian and white identities because their parents had not discussed it with her. She explained:

They didn’t talk to us like so much when we were kids, like you are Brown, or you are white, whatever, but just it was normal, but my sister did once come home from school crying, as a small young child because some children had said she wasn’t white and she said “yes I am,” and she is fairer than I am, and she was very upset, and that’s when my parents had a conversation about that with her.

Elizabeth’s sister was upset because she found out she was not “normal” or white, which had upset her. But Elizabeth did not seem to connect this experience with her own family. She explained that she did not want to introduce such topics to their son, as he was only five. However, when I asked them if they had thought about talking to their son about him being mixed race, Otis replied, “I don’t think we have, I believe in our own ideas about life and people and what – just treat everyone fairly.” Thus, they did not see the need to talk about race to their son, even though they admitted that in their everyday conversations, race was often named. Instead, they wanted to change their way of communicating to make it more race neutral.

Teaching children about recognising and fighting race and racism was not an explicit concern most of the parents in my study had, but some of them saw the importance of it in their children’s lives. For example, Emma, a white transwoman partnered with Mary, a Taiwanese woman, said that she would like their future child to have the confidence to tackle situations where they were being racialized. She said:

I would hope that I can raise somebody with the self-confidence, enough that if they encounter racism they would be like, “I know you are wrong, and I understand that you are
coming from a place of ignorance.” So that’s not going to be an insult or anything. It is an opportunity to like – educate you for five seconds, like even if it is a six-year-old.

Emma wanted to have her children who were able to differentiate between right and wrong and who could apply this to racially charged situations and educating others. She was the only participant in my study who connected talking to kids about race so they could recognise and confront racism. However, she believed that racist behaviour stemmed from ignorance and reduced racism to an individual problem rather than a structural one.

Meintel (2002), in her study of Francophone Canadian parents raising mixed-race children with partners of minority backgrounds, discussed how parents develop “identity projects” to make sure that their children embrace certain aspects of their parents’ ethnic identities. Meintel (2002) focused on intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural elements to children:

When children have several possible ethnic identity referents, be this for reasons of genealogy or biography (e.g. society of residence), parents tend to form what we call identity projects for their children that are more or less explicit. Such projects tend not to be articulated in cases where children’s ethnic status appears to be obvious, homogeneous (“pure”), and incontrovertible. When such is not the case, identity projects are likely to become the subject of discussion and planning between the parents and will orient some of their priorities and strategies in bringing up the children. (p. 104)

However, I would argue that how well such identity projects succeed or how much investment they require, may depend on the children’s other characteristics and the social meanings attached to them. For example, Dean, a multiracial participant from my study with Indian and Scottish heritage, was not read as Scottish in spite of his Scottish accent and last name due to his phenotype.

When they discussed raising mixed race children, several respondents talked about culture instead of race and emphasized the need to teach their children different languages and
cultural practices. For example, Maxine, whose partner Rajesh is of South Indian ancestry and speaks Tamil as his first language, was keen to ensure that their future children could speak Tamil. Maxine was trying to learn Tamil herself at the time of the interview. Rajesh confirmed her views on the importance of language:

"That is one of biggest worry as well. I have seen a lot of kids who the families settled abroad in a different culture, and they don’t get the language anymore. Their English accent is so pure as a Western kid. You can’t tell that the kid is like belongs to that community because basically the kid has transformed, and the entire thing is lost. Sometimes there are scenarios when the kids don’t understand what I’m speaking because I talk with a different accent. Sometimes there are scenarios when the kids don’t understand what I’m speaking."

In their individual interviews, both Rajesh and Maxine told me that they had had several follow-up conversations about this part of their combined interview, as they both wanted to ensure that Rajesh could communicate with their future children and the kids learned Tamil culture and language.

Among the other couples who participated in my study where one partner had a first language other than English, they too were keen to preserve both languages. However, many found it challenging in practice. Ligaya wanted to teach her daughter Tagalog, but since the couple spoke English at home, this was not working out in practice. Meera and Mark had three adult children, but none of them spoke Tamil, as Meera’s parents did not teach her the language after moving to the UK. They felt that they needed to prioritise English over their mother tongue, and it was better to avoid speaking Tamil even at home so their children could integrate better. Thus, Meera could not speak Tamil, and she could not teach it to her children. Certain languages were more valued than others. Blue, a Turkish woman married to Jo, a white Dutch man, explained that teaching Turkish to their child may be less useful than French or English in a Canadian context.
Ann and Jacque, who are an Anglo-Québécois heterosexual couple, were raising their two sons at the time of the interview. Since the children were being raised in Vancouver, the couple was very concerned with making sure that they learnt French as their first language. Both the children had French first names and they had taken Jacque’s last name. Ann said that she accepted their children would take his name because it was important to preserve their French heritage. Jacque explained, “since I am the minority here, it is important for me they have their French heritage.” Jacque and Ann are both white, but Jacque’s Québécois background made it pertinent for him that their children were well-versed in their French heritage. Among my participants it was often the partner of colour or the “minority” who was more concerned about their kids losing their cultural and linguistic heritage. Most of the white participants in my study spoke English as their first language. However, the Canadian participants who were from a Québécois background were concerned with making sure that their French heritage was transferred to their children, as Jacque’s example shows. Ann’s mother was not very happy about the couple’s children taking up French names as she found them hard to pronounce, and felt it was unnecessary when the children lived in Vancouver. However, Ann and Jacque were determined to give French names to their children to signal their Québécois heritage, especially when the children were growing outside of Quebec. Meintel (2002) has described how children’s names are significant to mark their ethnic identity and implements parents’ identity project for mixed children.

Focusing on culture instead of racial difference is a strategy also practised by families going through transracial adoption. Dorow (2006) argues that adopting white parents often overlook the racial differences of children from Asian countries and instead emphasize their enriching cultural differences. She describes these as “parents who imagined their Chinese
children bringing delightful but unproblematic difference into the embrace of white multiculturalism” (Dorow, 2006, p. 374). However, many of them later realized the social significance of racial differences.

The responses of some of the participants that I interviewed highlighted the significance of the appearance of their child in terms of their skin colour. They deemed this to be relevant to whether they would teach their children about race. Some of the parents seem to suggest that talking about race would be more important if the child appeared to be a person of colour. For example, Mark mentioned that his three children with Meera presented predominantly as white and therefore race did not play a significant role in how they raised them. The conversation between us went like this:

Interviewer: Do you think if your kids looked more mixed race than you would have more consciously think about these issues?

Mark: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, if they would have been different, they would actually … she would be on the other side a little bit because I would not look so much like them, have the same skin colour, and I would have a different experience, I think.

Meera: Yeah, and I think, if you had to parent children who experienced racism, that would be very different.

Mark did not think he needed to engage with issues of race in raising his children because they passed as white. This type of response presents race as a problem only for the people of colour. Being white or passing as white does not require one to engage with racism.

Meera had a different view. She pointed out that her adult children had experienced race in subtle ways when their white peers saw them as white allies and made racially biased statements, assuming they would agree. Thus, presenting as white does not mean mixed-race children can avoid encounters with white racism. In Mahtani’s (2014) study, being multiracial often allowed some mixed-race women to pass, but many chose to assert their mixed-race
identity instead. Importantly, deciding when to pass is a privilege which is more readily available to light-skinned mixed-race people.

At times couples tended to take a more pragmatic approach in discussion of children. They evaluated their responses to race and racism based on the risks they thought their kids may face. For example, Suzy, a Chinese-Canadian woman who is partnered with Lan, a white and Québécois man, said they had discussed having children in the future. Lan mentioned that he would like his kids to be “able to defend themselves if there is any form of discrimination.” Both wanted their kid to be proud of their Chinese and Québécois identities.

However, while Lan was concerned about their children facing racial discrimination due to their Chinese or mixed heritage, Suzy believed that being mixed race would not result in discrimination for their future child:

So, we have had that discussion before in terms of kids, and I know Lan has expressed concerns about “Oh well, it is going to be a mixed kid and oh, they are going to experience discrimination,” and I was telling him in psychology we have learned that mixed kids actually experience less discrimination … Just because in terms of mixed-race people, what they found in psychology is that they don’t experience a lot of discrimination mostly because people don’t know how to react to that. Because when it is clearly one race there are stereotypes around that, but when it is a mixed kid, they found out that there are more positive stereotypes with mixed kids. Such as they are more handsome, or they are more beautiful.

Suzy based her expectations on prevailing racial stereotypes associated with mixed-race children and her knowledge of psychological studies that reported less discrimination against mixed race children than children of colour. Although Suzy was well-aware of the prevalence of racial discrimination against racial minorities, she believed mixed race status would protect her child from it. Furthermore, Suzy did not associate raising a mixed-race family with cultivating racial literacy. For several couples I interviewed, racial literacy was only important if they thought their
children might be racialized. It was not an issue for children who appeared white or could pass as white. Thus, racial literacy became a concern for parents whose kids were further from the white norm and darker in skin colour. While all parents or prospective parents advocated for the socialization of children into their respective languages and cultures, whiteness was seen as an asset for mixed-race children.

Some of the parents remarked that a mixed-race child who was partly white could also receive positive attention. For example, Ligaya reported that in the Philippines her mixed-race daughter received a lot of attention because she was fair skinned. Ligaya said:

> When we go to the Philippines, she is the star because she is fairer than many of us so, many people like her when we go to malls and stores there are many salespeople in the store, unlike here, and so they would leave their work and try to talk to her and things like that, so she is very popular.

Similarly, Nina, who is an Indian women married to Jim, a white American man, felt that if they were to have children, they would be very fair skinned and have advantages in India due to the premium placed on fairness. She said that her children may get “preferential treatment.” Nina explained:

> The kids will fare better. Like if you look a little foreign and you have Indian blood – most Indians, especially if you are socially and economically in a good place, you will be fine, better than most Indians out there. It’s so weird. That’s how I see it play out. Like, just let’s say, for example Katrina [a famous Bollywood actress], like she’s racially ambiguous, but who is very white, but also has Indian in her, is welcomed with open arms.

Nina felt that instead of facing ostracism in the Indian community, her children would be “welcomed with open arms,” due to their racial ambiguity. This fits into the research on colourism in many post-colonial societies like India where whiteness is seen as a cultural asset (Chattopadhyay & Chattopadhyay, 2019).
Some of the parents also discussed their concerns about not being read as parents of their children because of the differences in skin colour and appearance between themselves and their children. For example, Ligaya, who is Filipina, had often been mistaken for her daughter’s nanny because her daughter appeared to be white. She believed that the reason people perceived her to be her daughter’s nanny had to do not only with her daughter’s appearance, but also because of the stereotype about Filipina women as caregivers to children and the elderly in Canada. These racialized stereotypes contributed to assumptions that she was the nanny and not the biological mother of her daughter. Ligaya had her child through IVF treatment and to ensure that she looked similar to Ligaya, she and her husband Rick had chosen a Filipina woman as an egg donor. Meera also mentioned that she was seen as her children’s nanny or caretaker because they appeared to be white like their father, Mark. She said, “people just ignored me and not talk to me as if am not part of the family because they all look like one thing, and I don’t.”

LGBTQ couples that I interviewed discussed adoption and surrogacy and the relative freedom they had to choose their children’s race. None of the heterosexual couples in my study mentioned adoption as an option under consideration. Sandy and Tamara explained that they had spent a lot of time thinking about their preference for a child who represented them both. The other reason was that they were aware that if the child looked more like one of the parents the other parent may not be identified as a parent. Sandy was going to carry the baby, so they chose a Black male sperm donor. Sandy said, “Partly why I wanted to use black sperm because I knew that my white privilege would shield me, whereas when you [addressing Tamara] are walking around with a white child it would be way worse for you and the child.”

Sandy and Tamara went through multiple rounds of insemination, but after several unsuccessful attempts, they decided to not have a child. Sandy explained that race came up early
on in the conversation when they were discussing raising a mixed Black-and-white baby. As Sandy explained:

We thought about what it means to bring a little black boy, particularly into the world with kind of violence that happens to black male bodies all the time and state-sanctioned violence, but on the other hand we also talked and in a joking way, but maybe not on a totally not joking way, about little black girls with white mothers, and how the white mothers don’t know how to deal with their hair, and how we see when we see little black children running around all the place. Tamara’s always it’s like, “that child has a white mother.” [Laughs]

Sandy’s response stems from her awareness of prevalence of racial violence against black bodies, particularly Black men in society. Unlike other multiracial children, children of Black and white couples are less likely to pass as white and escape racialization, which underscores the need for their parents to cultivate racial literacy for themselves and their children.

At the time of my study, Jon and Max were also considering adopting a child together. They planned to wait until Max was finished with his studies. They considered surrogacy but dismissed it because they found it to be too costly and “emotionally risky,” as surrogate mothers in Canada could change their minds at the last moment. In addition, they didn’t consider having a biological connection to be important for parenting. Max, who identified as Arab and Middle Eastern, mentioned that the most important thing for him was that “it was not a completely white child” because he was worried about the child not bearing any resemblance to him. Jon mentioned that since they had decided to choose adoption over surrogacy, they might make choices that could determine the phenotype of their future child. Jon emphasized how they raised the child was more important than how the child looked like, but for Max the child’s race and phenotype were also important. He explained his concerns as follows:

While that is there for me, there’s a double worry that I don’t want to go through this whole thing of people questioning, well, whose child is it. That aspect, or actually the child being
completely white, is as if Jon won out. I don’t want that competition to be brought into our marriage. That comparison is going to be there, and that child is also going to be put through it when they start growing up. They’ll be like, “well, your dad is obviously Jon,” because there’ll always going to be that part of the side that is going to make it obvious to them that they belong to [a] certain parent. While if the child is mixed then who’s going to say, “well, that part is mixed”? It could belong to me or to him, so you can’t really say.

The compromise that Max and Jon had reached was to adopt a child from a third ethnicity. Max could accept a child who didn’t look like either of them, but he was worried about his child being white like his husband. He felt it would be harder from them to be a family if their child only resembled one parent.

The appearance of the child matching that of the parents was a concern for both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples. None of the LGBTQ couples in my study had children, but most of them had considered or were in the process of considering raising children together. LGBTQ mixed-race couples could choose different pathways to raising children, and that allowed them the possibility to discuss and reflect upon what having children meant to them. Couples in my study mentioned conversations around what it meant to have a biological connection with their child, the significance of the race and ethnicity of their children, and the possibility to choose the method they would use to have a child and to some extent the racial and ethnic origin of the child.

4.5 Conclusion

The intimate context of a mixed relationship provides an arena where interpersonal racial dynamics can be studied to advance understandings of how race is interpreted, negotiated, and experienced in intimate everyday contexts. The concept and practice of racial literacy (Twine, 2010) suggests how individuals might develop racial awareness through their engagement with their intimate partners’ experiences. However, it does not necessarily show how this contributes to anti-racist practice. Racial literacy is also about understanding and addressing structural
racism. However, this leap from developing an awareness about race and racism to actually confronting structural racism or engaging in anti-racist work is much more difficult and cannot be assumed.

In this chapter I investigated how racial literacy was or was not achieved in the context of interracial intimacy by looking at my participants’ experiences. I focused on the emotional labour for the people of colour involved in cultivating racial literacy and how it involves a continuous process. Among my participants, both white women and men struggled with racial literacy. However, white women were more willing to empathise with their partners’ experiences and learn from them. In contrast, white men became more defensive. They often denied and minimised their partners’ experiences of racism. I also discussed the possibilities how racial literacy might be cultivated by raising mixed-race children by analysing my participants’ views and experiences about parenting children together. In the next chapter, I place the experiences of my participants in the broader context of Canada as a multicultural nation and Vancouver as a cosmopolitan city to see how their personal narratives of interracial intimacy maybe shaped by the larger narratives of the nation.
Chapter 5: Narrating Intimate Experience: Connecting the Personal, the Social, and the National

Max: And then down south we have the complete opposite and one can only make a comparison and say, “wow okay we’re neighbours and this is so different in Canada when it comes to politics and society and community,” whereas in the [United] states it’s just not what somebody would expect. It’s very affirming and reassuring as well to go across Canada where no one particular race can trump you.

Jon: I know that we are in one of the better bubbles within Canada. I know that. But I just feel it’s encouraging and it’s promising for mixed couples.

This excerpt is from my joint interview with Max and Jon, who are a married couple that I introduced in the previous chapter. Max is a South Asian man who identifies as Arab and has permanent residency in Canada, while his husband Jon is a white American who also has Canadian citizenship. Like many other couples in this study, they situate their identity as a mixed couple in relation to broader conversations around multiculturalism and diversity in Canada, which gets further highlighted when they make comparisons with the United States. Many of my participants, including Max and Jon, talked about their emotional connection to the city of Vancouver, which they perceived to be a “safe” and “progressive” space where they could thrive. Some recognized that the rest of Canada maybe different from Vancouver. As Jon put it, Vancouver is “one of the better bubbles in Canada.” This metaphor captures the idea that metropolitan Canadian cities such as Vancouver are welcoming difference. However, some of my participants pointed to the gaps between their impressions of the city and the everyday reality they faced in Vancouver. Regardless, most couples saw some connection between their identity as a mixed couple and their relation to Canada’ pro-diversity and pro-nationalism national narrative.
This chapter examines how the personal narratives of the mixed couples I interviewed interacted with larger social narratives about the Canadian nation and its ostensible commitment to multiculturalism. I use the term narrative to describe the process of sense-making at multiple levels. Personal narratives refer to the ways in which individuals recounted their experiences, while social narratives relate to the larger social context, often telling stories about groups and communities, including the nation. I analyse the connections and intersections between the personal, social, and national in the context of interracial intimacy, paying close attention to how mixed couples talked about Canadian society and the nation in relation to themselves. How individuals constructed their mixed-couple identity in the larger context of Canada as a multicultural nation is the focus of this chapter.

These personal accounts do not emerge in a vacuum; individuals construct these narratives within social settings to meet the demands of the situations they encounter. How people construct their experiences as narratives must therefore be placed in the social contexts they inhabit, a context which are shaped by publicly circulating discourses and power relations. These larger cultural narratives shape how people narrate their own lives. For example, in her book *Talk of love*, Swidler (2001) discusses how the predominant institution of monogamous marriage structures couples’ expectations and narratives about love and romance. She argues that the public institution of marriage shapes how people talk about love and adjust their experiences to fit within wider social expectations.

Personal stories can be the entry point to examine the larger social and cultural narratives that constitute them. McAdams (2012) argues, people “negotiate society’s master narratives in the making of the self” (p. 16). Thus, personal narratives retain the potential to interrupt and reframe master narratives representing people’s agency. Narratives inform people’s sense of
identity in terms of who they consider themselves to be. They can shift over time not only in
terms of content, but also in terms of the power they exert on one’s identity. These larger
narrative shifts affect how groups and individuals construct their own sense of themselves.

Narratives are constructed at different levels. Socially circulated stories, even when they
are not grounded in practical experience, are intelligible to large numbers of people and frame
their personal narratives (Loseke, 2012). There is a need to acknowledge the interplay between
personal and public/social narratives to examine how they interact in shaping people’s social
identities and experiences. In this chapter I am focusing on how couples relate their personal
narratives within a larger social and national narrative about Canada.

In the context of interracial intimacy, how people narrate their experiences of interracial
intimacy needs to be studied in a context where there are multiple public narratives circulating,
and which support different interests and social hierarchies. Childs (2009) examines how popular
images and discourses of interracial romance provide private scripts for desire. She argues that
the proliferation of media images of interracial romance reflects an ideology of a multiracial/
multicultural ideal that ignores racism and racial inequality in society. She calls these celebratory
media representations “safely voyeuristic” (Childs, 2009, p. 88). In her view, the production and
consumption of interracial relations in the media does not imply acceptance. Instead, this may
become a safe space where interracial intimacy can be indulged and consumed to satisfy liberal
and progressive pretences without challenging the racial structure of society.

Childs’s (2005) study of interracial Black and white couples in the United States shows
that these couples continue to face social opposition, even though their personal narratives follow
a race-blind rather than a race-conscious narrative strategy. Although couples in her study often
downplayed the role of racism in their everyday experiences, closer scrutiny reveals its
prevalence and significance. Colour-blind language can disguise and normalize racial hierarchies in personal relationships and in society more generally (Childs, 2005). In the Canadian context, Deliovskey and Kitossa (2017) raise similar concerns about the celebration of mixed couples as a triumph of multiculturalism, one that obscures and overlooks racial injustice and the historical and ongoing effects of settler colonialism. These themes emerged in many of the interviews I did with mixed couples, as I discuss in this chapter.

Dorothy Smith (1993) argues that social life is organized by ideological codes that may operate outside of conscious intentions and which shape how people produce and interpret social texts. In the context of her writing on the dominating model of Standard North American Family, Smith (1993) has defined ideological codes as “a constant generator of procedures for selecting syntax, categories, and vocabulary in the writing of texts and the production of talk and for interpreting sentences, written or spoken, ordered by it” (p. 52). For many of my participants, multiculturalism was a positive force in Canadian society, one that functioned as an ideological code and, which dramatically shaped how people talked about their relationships.

5.1 Being Canadian and Being Mixed: The Personal and the National

The personal stories of the couples I interviewed provide an entry point into the circulation of broader social and cultural narratives about the nation. They illustrate the ways in which intimate narratives might be related to larger social and national narratives of race and diversity in Canadian society. This interplay between personal identities and public narratives affects the development of people’s identities (Loseke, 2007). Narratives play a formative role in the construction of identities for groups and individuals. Twine and Steinbugler (2006) claim that “interracial families, like nation-states, can be viewed as sites where competing racial projects are negotiated” (p. 343). Following their lead, I examine how mixed-race couples constitute their
own identities as individuals and couples and how they interact with and negotiate the larger narratives regarding interracial intimacy that circulate in Canada. Mixed unions, I argue, play a significant role in narrating the story of a multicultural Canadian nation.

The couples that I discuss in this section talk about their identities in relation to Canada and the Canadian nation, and how they fit with one another. For some mixed couples, the myth of Canada as a multicultural utopia which supposedly embraces difference makes it an attractive place to live. The couples I interviewed discussed what a Canadian identity meant and how they related to it. Often, they connected their national identity to the city of Vancouver. Some described a Vancouver Canadian identity, as cosmopolitan, urban, and progressive. For example, Katy, a second generation Chinese Canadian woman engaged to Ralph, a white British man, describes their relationship and their connection to Vancouver as follows:

I suppose in terms of the culture, I suppose I would say that we are very Canadian. So, very Vancouver, I think we’re very much, I would describe that we’re very much what kind of Vancouver is ideally, what is meant to look like in terms of like different cultures coming together, taking the best of both and living a healthy, happy life, accepting those two different kinds of points. I think that’s what I like about Vancouver.

Katy believes that Vancouver upholds values that fit with her relationship with Ralph. She chooses to identify with Canada rather than their own cultural and racial identities because Katy believes that Canada embraces them, and Vancouver offers them a space to be something more. She describes this sense of belonging in the following way:

I would say, we have our own identity. That’s like it’s not Chinese and I think it was just not, I would probably say it could be identified as like a Canadian, typically Vancouver type of identity. When it comes down to it, it’s our identity and because we’ve been together. We’ve gone through these things, then we’re in a position now where we get to define our own identity and not for the people … for the most part I think Ralph and I really identify predominantly as we are Canadian.
Her British fiancé Ralph, who at the time of his interview was in the process of applying for permanent residency in Canada, agreed:

I think that’s what I like about it, I can’t speak very much for other parts of Canada, but particularly in Vancouver is that you can identify with being Canadian. That means many different things and that’s why I like to say you could be … I can be from England and then I can be from Canada, but with Chinese heritage. But it doesn’t matter with Canadian, like, that’s, not like I’m not matching up as Canadian, like, in an official capacity. I’m currently applying for permanent residency, but I identify as that being not, knowing my English heritage. That’s just kind of, like, it’s a modification almost. I mean, I bring that heritage with me, but Canadian, like, Canada is a place where we can take that and mix it together and make it – and it’s okay – it’s okay to be there.

Ralph discusses the ability of the Canadian identity to subsume differences and include people with different national and racial backgrounds in the Canadian nation. His assessment of the inclusiveness of the Canadian identity is based on his experience of living in Vancouver. He does not see any difference in being Chinese or white and British in terms of one’s ability to be included in the Canadian nation. However, historically the two groups have had very different status and experiences in the Canadian nation. The British came to Canada as colonisers and continue to occupy the dominant position as colonial settlers, while the Chinese have a long history of being excluded and racialized in Canada (Yu, 2022). These histories continue to shape the present moment in significant ways. The case of the posters asking white people in Vancouver to rise against the supposed Chinese dominance that I discussed in the last chapter highlights the continued resonance of history in the present.

Regardless, the presumed inclusiveness of Canada was an attractive feature for many of the mixed couples I interviewed. They embraced it as they saw it fusing together their individual differences. Many felt that the “Canadian mosaic” represented their own interpersonal process of being more than a singular identity, a coming together of different identities. However, the
question remains whether all kinds of cultural heritage are recognized as a part of Canadian multiculturalism or whether this seeming national acceptance is limited and selective.

Razack (2008, p.122) claims that the cultures of certain immigrants are often seen as threatening towards the values of “original citizens” (who are imagined as white and of European descent), making culture the basis for racialization for many communities of colour. This is evident in the contrast between Katy and Ralph’s experience. Ralph is British and white and finds Canada to be an inclusive and inviting place where he does not face racism, resentment, or hostility for being an outsider. In sharp contrast, Katy is Chinese-Canadian born in Canada. Yet she felt she became a target of racist anger even in her beloved city of Vancouver. This was evident in the 2016 posters that warned white people of the increasing power of Richmond’s Chinese community (Slattery, 2016), which I have discussed in Chapter 3. These posters claimed that the growing presence of Chinese people in Richmond was a threat to white people, even though a large section of this population in Vancouver include Canadians who are of Chinese descent. This resentment against Chinese Canadians can be understood in the context of Vancouver as the gateway city to the Pacific Rim. Yu (2009) describes Vancouver as the capital of Pacific Canada. Since the 19th century, Vancouver has had close relations in terms of trade and migration with countries in the Pacific Rim, particularly China. According to Yu (2009), “rather than a geographical description, Pacific Canada refers to a perspective on Canada’s past, present, and future that highlights the ways in which the nation has been and increasingly will be shaped by its engagement with the Pacific rather than the Atlantic world” (p. 1014). In this context, one can situate the posters in Richmond as a reminder that Canada is white and Chinese Canadians do not belong.
This resentment against a successful minority can be understood using Sullivan’s (2017) concept of “white priority,” which she describes as “the felt sense of coming before someone else” (p. 179) that some white people have. When this sense of self cannot be confirmed, it can lead to a racist backlash. Although Canada is a multicultural country offering equal rights to all its citizens, it is still the white people who consider themselves to be the unofficial gatekeepers of the nation and express their power by refusing to grant national belonging to those they deem as undesirable (Hage, 2002). Writing on Australian multiculturalism, Hage (2002, p. 50) argues that “there is an important, and historically growing, incompatibility between the state’s formal acceptance of new citizens and the dominant community’s everyday acceptance of such people.” I discuss Hage’s (2002) critique of multiculturalism as an effect of white nationalism later in this chapter. Despite immigration from different countries and cultures and the public commitment to diversity, Canadianness continues to be associated with whiteness (Paragg, 2015).

Not all my participants viewed Canada in this way. Elizabeth, a mixed-race woman of Indian and white Canadian descent, opines that there is space for difference in Canadianness:

> When I tell them my mom is Indian and my dad is Canadian, they always still assume that my father is Indian even though I say he is Canadian. I usually have to say he is white and like because Canadian can mean so many different things, so I mention he is a Canadian and he was born here, but people think his parents were Indian.

Her experience shows that the term Canadian can contain multiple meanings and the association between whiteness and Canadianness is not always assumed. However, her experience also points to the ways in which the people she was in conversation with assumed that her parents were monoracial. Elizabeth’s parents were expected to be from the same cultural/racial background.
The capaciousness of Canadian identity, its ability to encompass different cultural and racial identities, made it attractive to some of the mixed couples I interviewed. Kris, a Korean-Canadian man partnered with Anita, a white Canadian woman, talked about being “totally absorbed into Canadian culture” and identifying as very Canadian. He explained how mixed identities and mixed families contributed to the making of a Canadian identity and referred explicitly to immigrants settling in Canada and the assimilation of their children:

And once their kids grow up and do their thing they will assimilate, they will make the culture their own, they will blend, they will be hybrid, and then when they marry someone like traditional “white,” then it keeps blending. It just becomes its own identity. And so, I like it, I like it a lot and when I see the rise of it all, I think is great, that’s why Canada is awesome. Because yes, they have a melting pot, but it’s a true melting pot.

Kris described a blended Canadian identity as emerging through generations of assimilation and intermixture. However, his account assumed that there is a core Canadian culture that is welcoming to everyone. For Kris, newer immigrants could imbibe Canadian ways and could assimilate into the “traditional white” culture. Kris’s arguments reflect scholarship that suggest intermarriage can contribute to assimilation and integration of immigrant in multiethnic Western societies (Alba & Nee, 2003; Rodríguez-García et al., 2015). Song (2009) has discussed how intermarriage with white partners is seen in terms of integration of minority partner in mainstream society. Minority groups participating in larger number in intermarriages are perceived to “have been successfully ‘incorporated,’ and they are not regarded as posing social or political problems for mainstream society (Song, 2009, p. 333). However, such incorporation does not necessarily signal a transformation of social hierarchies that privilege whiteness in the mainstream society.

Hage (2002) problematizes this idea of an inclusive multiculturalism where different groups can become a part of the nation by blending in together. He argues that there is a deep
relationship between nationalism and racism. In nations that are historically conceived as white, the question of who can legitimately become a part of the nation is settled by the white nationalists who occupy the national space and hold the power to exercise the national will. Hage (2002) describes the idea of a nation dominated by white people to be a fantasy of white supremacy: “White belief in one’s mastery over the nation, whether in the form of a White multiculturalism or in the form of a White racism” (Hage, 2002, p. 18). Hage (2002) writes in the context of Australian multiculturalism, and he is critical of the national narrative that portrays multiculturalism as a break from racism. In his opinion both are grounded in the belief of a white nationalist core, which has a prior claim to the nation. I believe his analysis is relevant to the Canadian context due to similarities between Australia and Canada as multicultural English speaking settler colonial countries.

One of my participants who challenged the idea of Canadianness is Jacque, a white, Québécois man. He describes mixedness as the basis of Canadianness, as different groups in Canada who mixed with each other to form the country:

In the sense that there’s so many differences, we always see Canada as a same culture, but I think a lot of people here are the same on that. They come from different background, but they can’t just take the Canadian identity … I’m just saying that with the diversity that is more visible now in Canada, people go trying to protect their Canadian heritage, so they build a story how we are this strong, unique culture, because they’re trying to protect something. So, they build a story, but they erase all the fact that there’s, that group was created on mixed couples also.

Jacque rejects the idea of Canada as based on some homogenous core, which is accepting of other differences. He views the assumption of homogeneity itself to be a construction of dominant Anglo-whiteness.
Hage (2002) describes whiteness as “an ever-changing, composite cultural historical construct” (p. 58). He further argues that its roots can be found “in the history of European colonisation which universalised a cultural form of White identity as a position of cultural power at the same time as the colonised were in the process of being racialized” (p. 58). Hage (2002) contends that no one can be fully white, and whiteness is a fantasy position that some are qualified to yearn for and identify themselves as white.

We can place Jacque’s predicament against the backdrop of Hage’s (2002) discussion of whiteness as a position of cultural power. Jacque identifies as white, but because he belongs to the French minority in Canada and identifies as Québécois, he does not see himself as occupying the same position of dominant whiteness that Anglo-Canadians do. This highlights the fragmented nature of whiteness in the Canadian context, where Anglo-Canada has dominated the French minority in Quebec. Even though both the groups in question are white, they do not enjoy the same level of power in Canadian society. Hage (2002) has argued that no one can be fully white. This hints at the relations of dominance and subordination among white people, which is relevant to the Canadian context in terms of French and English. Jacque views the assumption of a unified Canadian culture to be a dominant construction of whiteness, which glosses over the internal tensions and contradictions, including the conflict between Anglo and French Canada.

Jacque’s view is similar to that of George, a white Anglo-Canadian man partnered with Liv, a mixed race, Punjabi-Québécois woman:

I think it’s really important in these, kind of, situations to acknowledge that Anglo-Canada has a very monolithic view of itself, right? Like the differences between people in Alberta, and Manitoba, and Anglo-Ontario, or in BC, and Newfoundland, like, these places, kind of, smooshed together in a lot of ways. Like there’s this sort of idea that there’s one Canada, and this is actually one of the big problems I think that when people come from Quebec or other places that have very distinct separate culture, when they come Anglo-Canada, they’re like, “Why does everyone have this weird monolithic idea of what Canada is?” And
it grates both ways, right? But that’s – that is the way Anglo-Canada is. And what happens is when Liv or any Québécois enters Anglo-Canada, like, Anglo-Canadians are like, “Why are you so different to me?” and Liv is like, “Why aren’t you accepting the fact there’s more people than you?” Right? And that’s when the French comes. So, when I say – like, that’s why I’m very careful to say, like, Anglo-Canada has this idea of multiculturalism that is not shared by, like Quebec.

The tensions between English and French Canada are important given the history of Canada as a country found by two nations based on colonial origins. In the national imagination, English Canada remains dominant. Canada’s multiculturalism policy emerged as a response to the tensions between the French minority in Quebec and the English majority in rest of Canada (Boyd, 2015). Although the multiculturalism policy recognized the French and English as two founding nations on equal footing, the French continue to experience themselves as a minority dominated by the English majority. In this context, Québécois identity becomes an entry point into understanding how difference has historically been constructed and addressed in Canada.

5.2 Canada as a Place of Refuge: “Racist, but not Like the Others”: The Relative Story

For the most part, the couples I interviewed for this study shared a positive view of Canada. Most seemed to agree with the larger public narrative that Canadian identity illustrated the success of multiculturalism and integration (Mackey, 2002; Mahtani, 2014). For example, Dan, a third-generation Chinese-Canadian man, describes his sentiments as follows:

I guess I would say I am somewhat patriotic to Canada. I do like the country, how they choose to run things, and how they choose to treat their people. I see that they don’t really treat anybody any differently because they were or what they are, very fair across the board.

Dan’s statement presents Canada as a place of refuge, which is “fair” and does not discriminate on the basis of people’s identity or past history. This is an idealised view of Canada, which ignores a long history of exclusion of different groups, including Chinese immigrants, and
Canada’s identity as a settler colonial regime that occupies indigenous lands and waterways, denies Indigenous sovereignty, and condones colonial violence.

Yet several participants echoed Dan’s sentiments by connecting Canada to the values of hospitality, a willingness to welcome difference and a place of safety, especially for those whose racial and sexual identities may be marginalized in other places. Dina, a white Australian woman who moved to Canada after marrying her Black American-Canadian husband Henry, said:

The narrative that Canada holds on to around being a refuge for people who are fleeing persecution, and it’s appropriate to problematize that narrative, but at the same time I’m proud to live in a country that even bothers to have that narrative. And I think it’s like something that Henry does talk a lot about in his work is the power of narrative, and how if we understand ourselves to be citizens of a nation that receives oppressed persons with open arms that actually don’t shape in some ways how we actually act. Canadians like to see themselves as accepting of people who are Indigenous, and we accepted the people who were fleeing slavery and oppression, and we are accepting refuges from Syria and other parts of the world, and I think that kind of … even though it’s clearly problematic some of this understanding, I think it also does help to shape us in positive ways.

Dina’s statement clearly establishes the power of a public narrative that seeks to present Canada as a progressive nation shapes the outlook and behavior of those who live here. Although the country may not necessarily hold up these values, many of my participants, including Dina, viewed the Canadian nation as progressive and worthy of admiration. Dina admires the attempts of the current liberal government to promote Canada’s image as a country tolerant of diversity because she believes it will encourage its citizens to be more accepting of others.

Blue, a Turkish woman married to Jo, a white Dutch man, also agrees with these views of Canada as a safe and welcoming space. In her view, the presumed inclusiveness of Canada is not only racial, but also political. Blue explains Canadian values in civic terms:
I think we both like Vancouver quite a lot, it fits to our lifestyles and what we like to do in general, and also politically and economically, we understand that Europe may have had some problems in future! And Turkey is definitely out of question.

Blue believed Canada, especially Vancouver, is an ideal place to live compared to Europe or Turkey because of the political stability and economic prosperity in the country. Blue and her husband Jo migrated to Canada to study because of career opportunities in their respective fields. Blue was opposed to the political regime in her home country, Turkey, and believed it to be against democratic ideals that she valued. She was also concerned about anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe, and clashes between far right and the far left. She felt Canada in comparison had a less polarised political space. Similarly, Jon, a white American and his husband Max, a South Asian Arab man, describe Canada as offering them a safe space.

Max: We are aware of as a gay couple, and especially an interracial couple, that’s a place that’s going to be safe for us to go to.

Jon: I don’t ever feel unsafe in Canada. There have been places in the States where from a safety standpoint we might not.

The city of Vancouver is central to Jon’s account. His opinions of the nation are shaped by his experiences of living in Vancouver and vice-versa. Jon’s sentiments are shaped by Vancouver and Canada’s progressive stance on LGBTQ rights:

When we started talking about where we would make our home, I was already living in Canada. I’m originally from United States. At that point in time gay marriage wasn’t recognized in United States. We were talking about those options, and we also talked because we have connection in Europe. It was – we could go make a life together there, but we opted for Canada. He moved here and we got married, we celebrated our fifth wedding anniversary last year.

His husband Max echoed his views but emphasized Canada’s relatively welcoming stance towards migrants and refugees. He said, “Canada is going to be that country which in this
racially charged atmosphere that the current world is going to be the one that says, ‘you know what? There’s no such thing as race per say. Everyone’s welcome.’” Thus, he judges Canada to be a hospitable space, which could be welcoming for people irrespective of their race.

Other participants also viewed Canada as a good place for couples from different countries. Some explained that immigration laws were more open for their spouses. For instance, Bob, a white American man engaged to Noor, a mixed race, French-Egyptian woman, claimed that Canada was the perfect country for them to settle down in. It was a “middle ground” between Europe and United States:

For sure, for me, because I knew that they would value her French here and it would be easier for her to get a job. I mean, Canada is easier to immigrate to in general. I have good friends here, and I knew that I could immigrate, and I knew that even if there was only me immigrating with myself, she would have a good chance of joining me. Whereas if [we] went to the States, it would be like, we need to get married before and to sort of a lot of other things. I don’t even know where to start there. It would have been a big culture shock for her as well. Canada is a nice middle ground.

Bob considered Canada to be a hospitable place for both himself and Noor, despite their differences in terms of nationality, race, and culture. This enthusiasm about Canada’s hospitality was not shared by everyone. Phil, a Mexican man who immigrated to Canada because of his wife Gina, a white Canadian woman, told me that many people jokingly asked if he truly loves his wife or just wanted to find a Canadian to marry so he could settle here. He said:

A lot of times, people in Canada will assume that I have move here to find a better job and that, and then it’s like, “Oh, you’re lucky. You’re smart that you met a Canadian and then you marry and then you were able to continue living here.” When it was the opposite, she’s the one who went to Mexico and we met in Mexico, and that’s how I moved here.

These kinds of reactions can be attributed to narratives of Canadian superiority that assumes Canada to be a desirable country for people who come here seeking better economic
opportunities or a place to escape from the adverse socio-political situations in their countries of origin. These views are also informed by an anti-immigrant sentiment, through which Canadians view immigrants, especially from poorer countries, as a kind of social, political, and racial threat.

Phil’s wife Gina explains that these reactions create a “resentment” among both of them, as there is an assumption that all the immigrants who live here must just be so grateful that they’re away from their shitty countries and in our beautiful multicultural place. We’re like, “No, if he wasn’t with me, he wouldn’t be here.” He doesn’t need Canada. He just wants to be with me.

The public narrative about Canadian inclusiveness and hospitality is complicated by the existence of racism against immigrants from countries perceived as non-white and poor. Thus, as some of my interviewees suggest, myths of Canada as a safe and welcoming space depend on who you are and where you come from.

When I asked couples I interviewed about race and racism in Canadian society, many were critical of Canadian inclusiveness. They also pointed out that many of their opinions were based on living in Vancouver, where they believed they were relatively shielded from overt forms of everyday racism. Some participants were aware of how limited their experiences might be. Overall, most of them judged racism in Canada to be less severe than in other countries. But some discussed the presence of a more subtle, muted, and systemic racism in Canada. Fleras (2014) calls this form of subtle racism in Canadian society racism 2.0, and he describes it as full of complexity and contradictions due to the combination of racism and multiculturalism in Canada. According to him, this new form of racism exists in a context where racism is believed to be non-existent and unacceptable, which makes it harder to recognize and name. Fleras (2014, p. 30) describes racism 2.0, as existing “at the level of unconsciousness and consequences, supplanting an earlier emphasis on intent and awareness. These deeply wired racisms are
discursively located at the institutional and cultural level instead of individual bias.” According to him, such forms of racisms are embedded in the founding assumptions of Canadian society’s order. I present a few examples of my participants’ responses where they discuss their experiences and views on racism in Canadian society in this section.

A majority of my participants acknowledged the presence of racism in Canada, but they thought racism in Canada was far less of a problem than it was in other places. Many compared Canada to the United States, which after the election of Trump become an obvious site for escalating racism in North America. For instance, Sandy, a white Canadian woman married to Tamara, a Black, Caribbean-Canadian woman, observed that “the trend is of thinking of Canadian racism as better than States or in relation to what is going on in the States.” Similarly, Max, a Middle-Eastern man married to Jon, a white American said, “I find it a lot easier to understand Canadians because I would have to say – Canadians their values are a bit different than the Americans very, very different as far as I’m concerned.”

While many referred to Trump’s election in the United States as a way to point out how much better things were in Canada, some felt that the Trump election worked as a wakeup call for those who thought racism was over in North America. For example, Gina, observed:

I think that the one thing that the fucking disaster dumpster fire that’s happening south of our border is what it’s doing is it’s waking people up to the fact that that stuff has been waking within our society for a long time, like it’s – because with people with colour are saying for a long time, and now white people are like, “Ah like what, there is racism?”

Other participants claimed that instead of comparing the United States and Canada, it might be better to compare cities and rural areas to get a more nuanced picture. Elizabeth, a mixed-race woman married to a white American man, who lived in Canada and the United States, approached the issue of racism as follows:
As in insider, somebody who grew up in [an] urban setting, I didn’t think much about race or racism that much, maybe in Quebec, but I thought about the linguistic issues. I guess I was always from multicultural big cities, so I thought Canada is awesome. In Canada it [racism] doesn’t exist. In the US that’s where all racists are, and that’s the part of me that has changed, actually a lot, in visiting and living in the US and different parts of and visiting different parts of the country; big city and rural area, are tearing down my preconceived notions about that. … There’s a level of racism that might exist in Canada, but if you are not looking for it, if you are not in that community, then you don’t see it and you might believe it everywhere in Canada is like Toronto and Montreal and Vancouver, but that’s not the case.

Based on her own experiences of racism in Canada and the United States, Elizabeth infers that racism exists in Canada on the same scale as the United States, but it is not as present in the public domain. She believes the difference between metropolitan cities and the rest of the country is also significant here. I would argue that the overarching narrative about Canada’s progressive politics and multicultural tolerance (Mahtani, 2014) gives the impression that racism is not as prevalent in Canada.

Although the key reference point for comparisons with Canada in my participants’ narratives was the United States, some participants also compared Canada to other countries. Dina, a white Australian woman married to a Black American-Canadian man stated that she decided to move to Canada for love. But Canada also reflected her values better than her home country, Australia:

I’m moving to a country that better reflects my values and so I mean I would love to say that was the only reason that I moved Canada was that it was more progressive, that’s not the truth, a lot of the reasons was just logistical, but I do also have those feelings definitely … I’m still really aware of all the ways in which this government is in my opinion ahead of the Australian government. So, I’m still really happy to live in a country where marriage equality is the norm. I’m really happy to live in a country that has a relatively humane approach to refugee and migrant settlement.
Dina provides a concrete example where she and her Black American-Canadian husband, Henry, compared the inflight magazines in Australian and Canadian planes. They observed that while there were almost no non-white people in the Australian one, barring a single stereotypical representation, the Canadian safety video itself has a mixed gay couple. As Dina describes it:

The optics that Canada for the most part projects is one of a country that is more culturally diverse. And of course, media and communications are not the same thing necessarily as reality. But it’s still telling about what message this country is trying to project, and I know when I see that, that safety video, I feel really good about my decision to live here … it’s important to recognize that regardless of how progressive the policies of individual nation states are, we are still living in a white supremacist world and so while I say that I’m happy to be living in Canada now and that I feel that it’s more progressive than many other nations.

Based on the comparison between her home country Australia and Canada, Dina described Canada to be more progressive and more concerned with fair representation and acceptance of diversity. She viewed this as a strategic effort on the part of the Canadian state to offer an impression of inclusiveness, but she also appreciated that the state was willing to make such an effort. In a nutshell, Dina admires Canada for what it is aspiring to become. Her husband Henry said they chose Canada because “I feel like within the context of our specific relationship of those three countries [Australia, the United States, and Canada] that Canada is the most progressive socially and politically.”

Emily, who is a mixed-race woman of Thai and white Canadian descent, describes Canadian racism to be different than her experiences in other countries, especially Italy, where she went to visit her partner’s family. She recalls having dinner in a restaurant where her fellow diners made fun of an Asian server. They did not recognize her Asian heritage because she could pass as white. Emily believes that this would not happen in Canada in such a blatant form because the country is doing better to address racism, even if there is room for improvement:
But we’re privileged in a sense that, you know, and we are really exposed in Canada, you know you’re supposed to be accepting under these things. And maybe if we lived and grew up somewhere else, we would look down on those people for being other … but for us, it’s a different way … I did kind of always think, “well, you know Canada, we think we’re so much better than the States.” But it wasn’t until I really went to some other places. I really sort of – just the people in general are very progressive. The way that people think in Canada is – we are really more open-minded, we truly are, and you don’t recognize it is much until you leave.

For the most part, Emily believed that Canada was doing better than other countries in addressing racism, however, at the same time she acknowledged that Canada still had issues to address. She added:

There’s one side of Canada that I think is a little bit sad and overlooked in terms of racial issues. I think Canadians overall, we like to think that we’re really progressive, I mean like to think we’re really accepting, but there’s a lot of racial problems, especially having to do with native people and the prairies and maybe towards Asians.

Although Emily considered Canada to less racist than other countries, she pointed out that Indigenous and Asian people in Canada still faced racism. It was important to her that a belief in Canada to be a progressive country should not deflect from efforts to address racism against these groups.

The idea of Canada as a progressive country came up in in several conversations with my participants. Several discussed Canadian progressiveness as a way to minimise the prevalence of racism in Canadian society. In some interviews, participants described Canada as both progressive and racist. Instead of seeing these as opposing or contradictory views, it is important to see how they overlap. Even seemingly progressive discourses like multiculturalism in the Canadian context require scrutiny to see how they can be coopted by racist projects. Writing in another context, Stoler (1995) argues that racism can attach itself to progressive discourses: “Discourse invariably draws on a cultural density of prior
representations that are recast in a new form. That racism appears at once as a return to the past as it harnesses itself to progressive projects aimed at the future” (Stoler, 1995, p. 90).

This is certainly the case with Canadian multiculturalism.

Tamara, a Black Canadian woman with Jamaican heritage compares Canada with the United States to talk about anti-Black racism, but provides a more nuanced analysis:

The nature of racism is settler. Well, settling here is the thing. We live in this bubble of Vancouver, this bubble of progressive thought, but one hour outside Vancouver there is so much racism and against the Indigenous population, is not even funny. But I think that we forget because people who live in Toronto or people that live mostly in Vancouver because we think Vancouver is Canada. It’s this glorious speaking of like we all get along and we forget like really Vancouver is a very small part of BC and the majority of BC, I think is having a challenge with racism because of how people feel about First Nations or how people don’t educate themselves or just form opinions, and that is challenging because Canada does really feel, like Canadians in general do feel like because we have this horrible example to hold out, which is United States of America. It’s really just a matter of “we are not that bad, we are great, we are fine.”

Instead of talking about Canada as better in a relative sense and using the United States as a point of reference as many of my other participants did, Tamara points out the different histories of racism in both countries. She reminds us of how easy it is to look at the United States to feel better about the state of things in Canada. But comparison to the United States does not address the problem of racism and settler colonialism in this country.

Tamara, like Elizabeth, points out the difference between living in metropolitan Canadian cities like Toronto or Vancouver versus small towns, and how significant location might be for how people experience everyday racism. Tamara also uses the metaphor of a “bubble” to describe Vancouver, which suggests that the city’s residents enjoy a certain level of protection from the unpleasantness of day-to-race racism. However, this does not imply the absence of racism. Rather, it suggests the presence of public norms that prevent overt forms of racist
behaviour. However, as Tamara points out such protection is not offered to everyone who inhabits the city. Indigenous and poor people often don’t have access to class and racial privilege that could effectively shield them from racism. However, as Tamara worked in management of a public housing complex, and her work experiences made her perceptive to the subtle ways in which certain groups of people faced exclusion even with the abundance of general sentiment of inclusion in Vancouver. The metaphor of “bubble” has been used multiple times in the interviews I conducted. Different participants used this term to describe Vancouver and other metropolitan spaces as safe and progressive.

Amber, a white Canadian woman partnered with Roq, a Black Fijian woman, cautions against the danger of comparing Canadian racism with the rest of the world and assuming things are much better here:

I think there’s a danger of assuming more progressiveness here that invisibles some of the racism, and yeah, I mean, Trump. Well, I think certainly, what I get from Canadians, mostly white Canadians that, Canada is different than – and I agree that Canada is different and simultaneously, I think we’re deeply racist, and so, the danger isn’t – yeah, assuming this difference to protect us from racism or – and then if you don’t name it, you don’t have to deal with that, right? So, we think we’re progressive, so, I’m not sure if I’m articulating that properly, but I see it being – some risk being amplified in comparison to some really overt racism happening south of the border or in the UK.

Amber’s statement points to her frustration in assuming that racism is not a problem in Canada, especially in comparison to the United States.

Several other participants I interviewed tried to talk about the nature of racism in Canada through comparison. Ann, a white Anglo-Canadian woman from British Columbia and married to a Québécois man, described racism in Canada in relation to white supremacy, and how subtly it encroaches upon one’s conscious actions and unconscious assumptions. As a college teacher,
she felt that even when she tried to be conscious of racism, it continued to shape her everyday experiences:

I’d like to think if I have this ideal image in my head that Canada is not a racist society, but I don’t think that’s true because as a racist society – I think that your experience to the world in Canada is dramatically different based on the colour of your skin. I think it’s particularly bad if you’re Aboriginal or Black.

Ann is trying to think of racism as a structure that shapes one’s mode of thinking even without conscious awareness. She points to the fact that even though one may actively try to cultivate a non-racist worldview, by living in a racist society we are shaped by the force of racism. Similarly, Sandy, a white Canadian woman, points out that racism in Canada may be more explicitly directed at Indigenous and immigrant communities:

My – just broad reflection about races in Canada or race in Canada is that Canadians say we don’t have racism, and its bullshit … I would say generally there is a lot of racism in the face of immigration and certainly a huge amount of anti-Indigenous racism in Canada. Actually, I was speaking to a woman yesterday who works at the Inauguration Employment Council in BC, and she put it so beautifully. She was talking about how in her experience … she is an immigrant in Canada, and she was talking about how so many immigrants harbor prejudices against indigenous Canadians. She was like, it’s because they don’t understand the history, and she said it’s like there is no way to talk about race in Canada without understanding that this is a nation founded on colonialism. Like it’s impossible to even have that conversation unless you understand that the whole narrative around two founding nations is bullshit, and the colonized experience is the foundation.

Both Sandy and Ann, who are white Canadian women, emphasize the power of settler colonialism and white supremacy, which dominate Canadian politics and society. In the face of this, Canada continues to be a racist society, even though its racism is not as stark and evident as it is in many other countries. Sustained racism in Canada, especially against Black and Indigenous people disrupts the narrative of Canadian progressiveness.
Ronald, who is mixed race (Indonesian and Dutch) and partnered with Chrystal, a white Canadian, believes Canadian racism is just not that visible. He sees it to be outside the public sphere of political discussion and media coverage and thus escapes scrutiny:

I work at construction, and you know what? On YouTube people can write comments and because they’re anonymous, they can write whatever they want. The same way in construction bathrooms. Like people, nobody knows who wrote what with a Sharpie, and it’s just racist thing after racist thing. There are swastikas all the time. I guarantee you they don’t even know what it means, right? But it’s this desire to write the stuff that’s scary, like it’s still there. I go to the bathroom; it’s literally every single bathroom has something in there. Like I don’t understand and it’s not the same person, it’s a different handwriting.

It appears there is a strong desire to appear non-racist in Canadian society. This is aided by strategic comparisons with other countries particularly the United States, where racism and discussions of race occupy a more prominent space among the public. This helps to maintain the image and narrative of Canada as open minded and accepting. While this may promote such behavior, as several of my participants claimed, it also shuts down conversations about racism and pushes it out of sight.

5.3 Canada as a “Multicultural Utopia”

When the 2011 Canadian Housing and family survey reported a rise in mixed partnerships, these increasing numbers were celebrated in the mainstream media as a success of Canadian multiculturalism. For instance, an editorial in the magazine *Maclean’s* declared in its headline, “Canada is leading the pack in mixed unions – Why we’re setting the global standard for multicultural acceptance and integration” (2014). This is an example of an emerging social narrative that frames the increasing number of mixed unions as an indication of growing tolerance for racial and cultural diversity and for a supposedly diminishing racism in Canadian society. This can be read as an expression of a social narrative that frames and fosters a particular
interpretation of facts. Connor (2012) discusses how metanarratives focused on certain origins and trajectory of a nation might provide an interpretative framework through which facts derive their meaning and significance. The Canadian national metanarrative constructs its own image as a benevolent, pro-multiculturalism, and pro-diversity nation, supposedly providing a safe space for interracial intimacies to thrive.

In the Canadian context, multiculturalism as a value as well as an official policy seeking to promote ethno-cultural diversity has played a definitive role in the formation of the Canadian national imaginary (Fleras, 2014; Mahtani, 2002; Paragg, 2015). Internationally, multiculturalism is recognized as the defining characteristic of Canadian society (Kymlicka, 2004). Kymlicka and Banting (2010) consider the official ideology of multiculturalism to be the central component of the integration project of the Canadian nation, and they report “high levels of pride and identification with a multicultural conception of Canadian nationhood” (p. 61). However, the public celebration of Canadian multiculturalism often fails to register how Canadian multiculturalism is based on the acceptance of English Canadian culture and whiteness as the core of Canadian culture (Kalbach & Kalbach, 1999; Mackey, 2002; Paragg, 2015; Winter, 2015). Multiculturalism attempts to build a more inclusive Canada without a commitment to disrupt the status quo (Fleras, 2014).

In her study on multiculturalism in Canada, Mackey (2002) describes how cultural diversity is used to frame a Canadian identity, which shifts the public discourse from historical and contemporary discrimination against Indigenous people and ongoing settler colonialism to support the myth of the innocent and tolerant Canadian nation. Thus, the narrative of Canadian innocence and the promise of racial egalitarianism has continued to flourish and has become foundational to Canada’s national image. Multiculturalism was a theme that regularly came up in
my interviews, not only when couples talked about Vancouver and Canada, but also when they talked about themselves. Emily, a mixed-race Canadian, asserted:

So, for me I think any cultural mosaic or mixing is beneficial for any country. Canada will be a cool place I think because although it’s growing basically with immigration, you know and then the people that are living here like you said are mixing together which is good.

Her fiancé, Bubba, attributed this to multiculturalism, saying, “I think this stems from being a really open multicultural society, I mean you can’t just be narrow minded.” This kind of assessment of Canadian multiculturalism supports Canada’s self-image of being innocent and non-racist. Similarly, Jim, a white American married to an Indian woman, discussed how the ideology of multiculturalism is also significant to their identity as a mixed couple:

Because a part of my identity is multiculturalism and part of her identity is multiculturalism, and so part of our relationship identity is definitely multiculturalism, and … we tried to express that with our wedding with the choice of food. Having a, you know, Western-like rock/folk band play, and having dholkis [an Indian drum-like instrument].

Thus, he linked their identity and choices as a mixed couple with multiculturalism in Canada and its emphasis on valuing and celebrating difference.

Many of the couples in my study demonstrated an affective investment in Canadian multiculturalism as representative of their experiences and values. This was true for people of colour and for white partners who also migrated to Canada. I would argue that this attachment towards Canadian multiculturalism comes from a desire to belong to the national space. Hage (2002) has pointed out that national belonging comes naturally to the white nationalists who feel completely at home in the nation, but everyone else has a more tenuous belonging to this space. Emotional investment in the values of multiculturalism offers an opportunity to acquire some of the symbolic national capital that could signify belonging (Hage, 2002).
Although many of my participants appreciated the significance of multiculturalism in shaping Canadian society as progressive but others also pointed out its pitfalls. Lan, a French-Canadian man engaged to Suzy, a Chinese-Canadian woman, described the problem as follows:

Canadians are proud about the way we pioneered multiculturalism compared to most of Western, a lot of other Western countries really failed, right? So, one, I’m really proud of multiculturalism, I’m really proud of being an interracial couple, but then all this stuff happening, not just in the US, in Canada, in Quebec especially, so I have mixed feelings because I’m like, “hey, multiculturalism.” Probably less racism than other countries, but I’m not sure anymore.

Suzy added:

Yes, it’s kind of tough to be in a country like Canada where it’s like “Yes! Multiculturalism!” and “yes, it’s important to us and we’re all very open minded” and “we open our arms” and “yay, diversity!” But for someone who has experienced racism personally, it’s like, “that’s a nice idea but is it really put into practice?” It depends maybe, where.

Both Lan and Suzy viewed multiculturalism as a popular national narrative. But on the ground, they saw the reality to be different, depending upon where one was in Canada. Suzy talked about how her experience of living in suburbs like Maple Ridge was very different from living in the city of Vancouver, where for the most part people were more progressive and accepting.

There were others who were critical not just of multiculturalism, but of diversity too. Jo, a white man from the Netherlands studying in Canada and married to Blue, a Turkish woman, criticized the discourse of multiculturalism and particularly what he perceived as the use of diversity as a “magic word.” He said:

I have a very negative perception in terms of Vancouver and diversity as we talked about it. In terms of Canada, I do see Canada as a very open country and they do understand that if you manage immigration in a useful way, you actually get the best out of it. You get all the smart people and all the people that are actually productive in your society, and I do think Canada recognizes that. How do they manage it? Yeah, that’s a different topic, but I
do think they see the benefits of openness and diversity and stuff. I don’t use diversity as like a magic word. It’s like they equate it to something good, but they never explained what that did, neither there’s all sort of people, but why would that be better if there’s different people or more … Like a magic word, I go there, “Oh yeah, that is something to do with diversity.” But I never have any explanation.

Although one could question such sentiment as parochial, Jo rightly points to the ways in which an overuse of diversity in public and official narratives of multiculturalism, do a disservice by not engaging with the substantive meaning, value, and the necessity for diversity. It appears that Jo is skeptical of what multiculturalism has to offer. However, Jo’s critique also comes from a place where he believes diversity should only be valued if it is productive.

Hage (2002) calls this mode of thinking an “enrichment discourse,” which is based on creating an opposition between valuing diversity negatively and positively. The assessments of value are made by those who claim to represent the national will: white citizens (Hage, 2002). Hage (2002) argues that this way of thinking creates an opposition between enriched and enriching cultures. In this framework, migrant cultures are not placed on an equal footing with the dominant white culture, instead they are positioned as mere means to enrich the dominant culture. I would like to draw attention to the fact that such type of enrichment discourse is not only illustrated in Jo’s critique, but also present in how diversity and multiculturalism are framed in Canadian society. Thobani (2007) has argued that multiculturalism as a policy imagined immigrant communities in traditional terms, different from the modern nation, and encouraged them to constitute themselves according to culturalist tropes so they could enrich the Canadian nation through their difference, or what Thobani (2007) calls, their “strangeness” She writes, “the policy advocated that their strangeness was not only to be tolerated but also was to be preserved and made cannibalistically available for the nation’s sustenance and enrichment” (p. 164). Similarly, Ahmed (2002) writing in the context of multiculturalism in Australia, argues that
multiculturalism uses the strategies of incorporation and expulsion simultaneously, and allows certain forms of strangeness that strengthen the nation’s own claim to heterogeneity to be incorporated while threatening to expel others. She claims, “Such a politics would attend to how incorporation and expulsion can both work simultaneously to fetishize the stranger as the origin of difference” (Ahmed, 2002, p. 113). Thus, the figure of the ‘stranger’ is placed outside and judged to be the source of difference, which can potentially lead to conflict. In this manner, the nation itself is presented as neutral and willing to accommodate differences, while the responsibility is placed on the stranger to fit into the mould provided by the nation. Difference can be good if it strengthens the nation, and bad if it challenges the framework for inclusion that the nation offers. This framework made it possible to selectively endorse forms of difference that could sustain the existing relations of power in the nation.

Some of the participants in my study formed a connection between the policy of multiculturalism and the existing relations of power in Canadian society. They criticized multiculturalism for being selectively inclusive and exclusionary or unequal based on its need for reasserting the dominance of an Anglo-Canadian culture. For instance, George, a white Canadian man partnered with Liv, a multiracial, Indian-Québécois woman, describes Canadian multiculturalism as follows, “It’s sort of – white bread in Canadian fashion. Mostly. Other cultures are like a flavor. Like, you would put on food, or something.”

George’s critique demonstrates the double edge of Canadian multiculturalism, which appears to be progressive and inclusive but continues to perpetuate white English dominance through which other cultures become a source of Canadian legitimacy. This is especially critical in a country like Canada, with a past and present marked by conflicts over sovereignty, Indigenous, and French. Multiculturalism becomes a source of legitimacy for English
dominance, which is seen as capable of including other cultures, but only as superfluous enrichment for the national.

Henry, a Black American man who immigrated to Canada a few years ago, says that despite being supportive of diversity, the Canadian state fails to engage with race and anti-Black racism by maintaining a doctrine of multiculturalism that lacks substance. He explains:

I was going to say something and it’s relative to this idea of like what is, what happens when we don’t talk about race at all? … I think like some of the ways that there isn’t this, like, I do think that we need to like in the US and maybe in Canada too, like the conflation of race and culture and ethnicity, like it gets all garbled up and mixed up together. And it’s really hard to extract some of those pieces, and so I just feel like people again are sort of missing some awareness, like they may think they really are like cool with Black people, but then they do like really stupid shit around you to, like have you become, like fully aware that they’re like aware of these concepts, but they think they are just doing something like cool around you. I don’t know.

Henry’s discomfort emerges from being a Black American man who feels racialized in Canada, but in ways that are harder to identify and articulate. He believes that the conversation on race is missing from the Canadian public discourse, which centres on culture. Henry is critical of the policy on multiculturalism for minimizing or ignoring the significance of race to people’s identity and everyday experience. Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) study criticizes the popular discourse on multiculturalism because it failed to engage with inequalities. They assert that multiculturalism fails to displace white normativity and systemic inequality. Ahmed (2002) makes a similar assessment of multiculturalism in the Australian context. She argues, “The emphasis on culture over and above issues of political economy – or at least the refusal to understand culture as a site of a struggle that is also political and economic – means that multiculturalism neutralises the differences that it apparently celebrates” (p. 105).
The emphasis placed on culture and ethnicity in the Canada’s ideal mosaic of multiculturalism is also criticized by Nina, an Indian woman married to a white American man. She describes Canadian multiculturalism to be “wimpy” on race. Nina narrates an incident in her workplace where she had to refer to one of her vendors as Black to describe and identify them. This made her colleagues uncomfortable. She was critical of it and stated:

I think there’s a certain amount of sensitivity and honestly, to me it’s like a cowardice, completely not acknowledge that race does not exist. Whereas in the States, it’s the opposite. Everybody knows race is this and you’re going to, that’s kind of offensive, I think, for somebody to deny to say “Black.” I’m kind of offended by that. I understand it because they have these pressures of Canadian multiculturalism and don’t understand how to deal with it – they want to be respectful.

Nina stated that Canadian multiculturalism focuses too much on culture and ethnicity while trying to remove race from the public discussions. She felt it reduced a person to their nationality or culture. Nina described how it made her feel:

It is like “please be Indian.” You’re actually more than that, but you are expected to be Indian. Go be Indian, you know? And I’ve read some critical theory, like journal articles, where people are talking about the problems – criticizing this approach, okay, my parents are Indian, but I’m fucking Canadian, alright? I’m sick of everybody telling me to be Indian, I don’t feel Indian.

Although Nina identified herself as Indian because she was born in India and continued to hold Indian citizenship, she felt that she was encouraged to represent and enact a narrow version of Indianness in Canada. Nina believed that Canadians are interested in seeing non-white people as people with ethnicity and in the zeal to recognize those differences from a multicultural point of view, they end up confining people in those silos and set expectations of how to be different in the right way without threatening the existing system of recognizing difference without questioning dominance and exclusion. Thobani (2007) has criticized multiculturalism policy for
ignoring racial hierarchies and focusing on cultural differences that reframes the conflicts between groups in terms of differences of culture instead of a struggle for power and dominance. This reframing makes it easier to place the blame for conflict on minorities who are seen as possessing an excess of culture while the white nationals are seen as being cosmopolitan and lacking cultural baggage.

George explains how the narrative of inclusion of differences works in Canada:

I think that Canada, at least Anglo-Canada, has a very strong narrative of inclusion, and what you have is, you have a generation of people growing up with that narrative and believing that it’s true. And so, when they go and they like – then, when they go and they meet someone and they’re from a different racial background, their brain says, “Canadians aren’t prejudiced.” And so, then, they do it because they believe it’s acceptable, and they don’t, like – because it’s weird, because like, it’s not very long ago that Canada, like Anglo-Canada, throughout the many provinces, has engaged in really discriminatory practices … Like, Canada was aggressively and outspokenly racist until very, very recently. And now it’s still racist but less outspokenly so.

George’s statement highlights how the policy of multiculturalism attempts to erase or at least sideline the long history of racism in Canada. Multiculturalism operates as a public narrative that affects people’s perceptions and behaviour. For Thobani (2007), multiculturalism facilitates “the reconstitution of whiteness in its distinct (and historically new) version as a culturally ‘tolerant’ cosmopolitan whiteness” (p. 148). Hage (2002) has also criticized the discourse around tolerance because it places the onus on the majority to be tolerant, and in the process solidifies their dominant place in the nation’s public sphere because the calls for tolerance do not make redundant the ability of the majority to be intolerant. Thus, multiculturalism actually paves the way for allowing historical relations of dominance to continue as long as they were disguised as benevolent and politically acceptable.
George explains the effects the public narrative of multiculturalism has on the perception of Canada amidst Canadians, and how it may encourage mixed unions across cultural and racial differences:

Here’s this narrative of Canada is an inclusive and multicultural place. Like everyone in this generation has been – that had drilled into them since they were born. Like that’s the narrative they were told every day for their entire life. And now, that all these people are like, since at least the ‘80s, and now that all these people are growing up and starting relationships, that narrative informs their relationship decisions. They weren’t told that it’s bad to date someone outside their race, they were told actually, kind of, exactly the opposite. They were told that it’s good to do so. It’s good to be inclusive and Canada, so many different people, right? It means that this narrative, this sort of, like trying really hard to erase the sort of, remnants of a very real institutional racism. I don’t know how, like, I don’t know how to measure that because, like, these are two different forces acting. Like there’s the weight of, like, centuries of racism and there’s this relatively new idea of Canada as being this wonderful multicultural wonderland. And those two concepts are fighting.

George’s nuanced analysis shows how multicultural Canada might be in a state of what Bonilla-Silva (2003) has described as “racism without racists,” where the emphasis is placed on people as individuals being less prejudiced and more accepting, while institutional forms of racism and inequality are left unaddressed and pushed in the background in face of a positive public narrative of inclusion. George and his partner Liv both felt that the problem with multiculturalism is its lack of reflexivity and the assumption that there is nothing wrong with multiculturalism, and it is a good in itself. As George puts it, “The de-facto assumption is that it’s [multiculturalism is] right.”

The majority of my respondents saw Canadian multiculturalism as a positive backdrop against which their narratives and identities as mixed couples made sense. Participants who criticized multiculturalism saw it as limiting ways of being different and prescribing how difference should be articulated so the existing order can be maintained. It perpetuates an image
of Canada as being truly inclusive without challenging the prevailing racial inequalities and hierarchies.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused on the narratives of couples that connected their story with the larger story of the Canadian nation. I describe how Canada is seen as a place of safety and refuge, and even though most of my participants had witnessed or experienced racism or were aware of its existence, many believed it was milder when compared to the rest of the world. A Canadian commitment to multiculturalism was also heralded by the participants who often saw themselves as a part of the multicultural milieu and inclusiveness. Several of my participants diverged from this celebratory narrative and critically engaged with these positions. In the next chapter I will explore the lived reality of intersectional experiences of mixed couples in the study and juxtapose race with gender and sexuality.
Chapter 6: Interracial Intimacy at the Intersections of Race, Sexuality and Gender

Interviewer: Had Emma been a white man, how do you think your family would have reacted then?
May: No problem at all.
Interviewer: Yeah.
Emma: White’s better. They would see her as a success.

May is a Taiwanese woman living in Vancouver and is in a relationship with Emma, a white Canadian transwoman. May discussed her family’s disapproval of Emma because she is a white woman. But if she had been a white man, she would have been considered a good choice. As May explained, white men are seen as wealthy, successful, and preferred romantic partners in her community. Because she is in a lesbian relationship with a white transwoman, her family does not see this as acceptable. According to May, their disapproval had less to do with the fact that Emma was trans and more to do with that she was a woman. People in May’s community in Taiwan, insisted that she should be dating a white man in Canada. Her partner Emma explained the logic as “white’s better.” This view is entrenched in a system of racial hierarchy that places a premium on whiteness as a desirable quality. Interracial marriage involving a white partner can signify social mobility and success. However, for approval, it must conform to heteronormative and cisnormative ideology. May and Emma’s experience highlights the complexity of race, gender, and sexuality, and how it plays out through the life experiences of mixed-race couples. In this chapter I explore the intersections between race, gender, and sexuality and how these are expressed and experienced by the couples I interviewed. The intersectional approach allows for an analysis of how exercises of power, inequality, and vulnerability function in different contexts.
Collins’s (1986) discussion of Black feminist thought encourages an examination of the “interlocking” oppressions faced by Black women through the interplay between their race and gender identities. Collins (2005) claims that new racisms are hinged on intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Individuals inhabit multiple social locations and the intersection between them frames the complexities of their experiences. Similarly, Shields (2008) argues that “social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another … one category of identity, such as gender, takes its meaning as a category in relation to another category.” (p. 302)

Feminist theorists have investigated the co-construction and effects of heterosexuality and gender as normative ideologies (Butler, 1999). Dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality reinforce the system that supports the male dominance over women and heterosexual male dominance over gay, trans, and queer men, as Connell (2002) makes clear in her theory of hegemonic masculinity. Writing about interracial intimacy, Childs (2009) claims that these relationships open spaces for the expression of dominant ideas about race and sex that are integral to understanding the ways in which sexuality is racialized and how discourses on race are imbued with sexual meanings. There is clear overlap and interaction between heteronormative and racialized ideologies and yet there has been little discussion of how racial, gendered, and sexual stereotypes and expectations shape interracial intimacy. In this chapter I explore these intersections as they influence the self-conceptions and everyday experiences of mixed couples. One way of doing this is by looking at the boundaries that divide the normative from the exception and establish hierarchies between different forms of romantic relationships. Interracial intimacy is credited with breaking racial borders; perhaps more significantly, it also makes those borders visible.
Rubin’s (1984) circle of sexuality shows us that certain forms of sexual identities and expressions, based on social norms that separate “deviant” from “desirable,” are more acceptable and appropriate than others. Although she did not include interracial sex in her formulation, in some contexts, where interracial relations continue to draw social opposition and censure, it would be placed outside the charmed circle and in the realm of the inappropriate. Mixed couples who do not conform to heterosexuality may be regulated by multiple borders, hierarchies, regulations, and exclusions.

Much of the work on interracial relations focuses on heterosexual couples. Steinbugler’s (2012) comparative research addressed this gap in the literature and highlighted the experiences of both heterosexual couples and LGBTQ couples, which is an under-researched population. She reported that both heterosexual and LGBTQ interracial Black and white couples in the United States faced challenges, but of different kinds. Even though these couples shared an interracial status, the heterosexual pairs faced hypervisibility and hostility in public spaces, whereas LGBTQ couples faced invisibility. The double assumptions of monoraciality and heterosexuality as normative in romantic relationships means that these couples were not read or recognized as couples unless they expressed affection publicly or explicitly identified themselves as a couple. This chapter builds Steinbugler’s (2012) observations. Below, I consider the experiences of both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples as a way to discuss how heteronormative and gendered expectations shape the experiences of mixed-race couples. Given the dearth of literature on LGBTQ couples, I attempt to show the intersection between these multiple normative ideologies by focusing specifically on how the sexual and racial identities of LGBTQ mixed couples affected their everyday experience and sense of identity.
6.1 Being LGBTQ and Interracial: Invisibility, Identity and Experience

Initially I had planned on interviewing only heterosexual couples. However, I decided to include LGBTQ mixed couples in the study for two reasons: first, due to the paucity of literature on LGBTQ couples, and second given my interest in taking an intersectional approach to studying the experiences of mixed couples. Focusing on how LGBTQ mixed couples have navigated their experiences of race and heteronormativity helps us to see how different identities intersect to shape a couples’ everyday experiences.

Most of the LGBTQ interracial couples I interviewed saw themselves as a gay or lesbian couple before they thought of themselves as mixed. The participating couples felt that others around them often reacted more strongly to their sexuality than their interraciality. Importantly, these couples did not follow a colour-blind approach, nor did they say that racial differences between them did not matter. They were both colour and race conscious to different degrees and were also aware of their identity as an interracial couple. However, they believed that their LGBTQ-ness surpassed their racial mixedness in terms of how they were perceived and treated as a couple in everyday life. For instance, Jon, a white American man married to Max, a South-Asian and Arab man, explained as follows:

I imagine that people see us as a gay couple before they see us as a mixed couple. I think it’s interesting because gay is same and mix is different, and so it’s one of those, like do they see us as same or do they see us as different. And so, in some way I feel like they see us as same first, as opposed to seeing us different, even though visually we are quite different … So even though we appear different, I think that when people see us together, they think of us as the same.

Jon’s husband Max expressed strong agreement with this. Jon’s assertion appears to have come from a place where being gay is an identity that he shares with his partner, as they are both gay. While the racial difference makes them a mixed couple, with different racial identities.
Other couples discussed the intersection between sexuality and interraciality in terms of what was seen as more “shocking” or what was seen by others to be a greater “violation of norms.” As Robbie, a Latino Mexican man who is dating Dean, a mixed-race man of Scottish and Indian heritage, explained:

The first shock is us being gay, like because the assumption is not that we’re together until they find out we’re gay, right? So, they can’t really define, or they can’t really react to us being interracial couple until they realize we were gay because the assumption is, we are with girls.

His point is tied to assumptions of both heterosexuality and monoraciality, which can render gay interracial couples as invisible, as Steinbugler’s research (2012) has shown. Robbie and Dean are often perceived as heterosexual men who are friends. Thus, the reaction to them as an interracial couple is delayed and only comes into play after their identities as gay men are established.

Abdullah, an Arab man in a relationship with Tanner, a white Canadian man, points to how he processes the reaction:

Well, being gay is the shock, but it’s also – you diluted the unusualness of the interracial part. You’re already unusual because you’re gay, are two men together, so being interracial is like, irrelevant at that point. Because you’re already outside the norm. Not as we’re mocking it, but just like somebody who’s gay and left-handed. Who cares that you’re left-handed? You’re gay, right? You’re already unusual for being gay. That you are left-handed, it makes you even more unusual. Because if you say, 9% of the community is interracial, that means 9% of the 10%, which is .09 of the world, as interracial gay relationships.

Abdullah emphasizes the unusualness or the non-normative status of being interracial and LGBTQ. However, he believes that his LGBTQ status is more significant for others and works to dilute the “unusualness of the interracial part.” Being a gay couple already places him and his partner outside the norm and being interracial at that point becomes less of a violation. He describes the status of a LGBTQ interracial couple as a minority within a minority, which is
important when one attempts to understand how these social locations intersect. This also becomes clear when couples talk about how their interracial status affects their place in the LGBTQ community.

Overall, as my participants like Abdullah suggest, when couples are faced with external judgement, being gay is perceived as relatively more significant than being mixed. The typical response of the couples that I interviewed was that being LGBTQ was the first and foremost factor that affects how they are treated as a couple by others and how people react to them. Being interracial is perceived as significant to their sense of being a couple and to their experiences. Thus, their social experiences were more affected by being LGBTQ than by being in an interracial relationship.

These insights were often tied to living in Vancouver. For example, couples talked about their choice of neighbourhood in Vancouver. Where they decided to live was not only about affordability and convenience; it was also influenced by consideration of neighbourhoods where LGBTQ couples would be safe and accepted. As Robbie, a Mexican man married to Dean, a multiracial Canadian man, put it:

My partner really wanted to move to downtown, and the biggest reason is not race-related. It’s more like sexual orientation-related. He was in the closet for too long … He didn’t want to feel closeted outside of his home. So, to us, it was more the fact that we’re gay and then he’s like, “let’s move to downtown.”

Robbie’s partner Dean chimes in: “I think predominantly it was us being a same-sex couple that drove us out. I mean, I still have a condo out there [in the suburbs] and my folks live out there, but we don’t go very often.” Other gay men I interviewed also expressed similar concerns about acceptance and safety. Abdullah stated:
My living environment has definitely been affected by where queer people are accepted. I’ve always wanted to live here. As far as interracial relationship, I think if you are for the most part, if you live in a community that’s welcoming to the gays, that it’s usually welcoming to people of colour as well. But the other way around doesn’t work.

Abdullah explained that he would always choose a neighbourhood based on expectations of safety for himself as a gay man because he believed queer public spaces are safer for immigrant communities. But he believed that racial diversity did not produce tolerance for sexual diversity. Abdullah’s observation is related to cultural and religious norms in communities of colour that might disapprove of gay couples. This point was underlined by his own experience of coming out to his family and community. They refused to accept his gay identity and his choice to be in a gay partnership. In fact, their reaction highlighted a hierarchy of acceptance towards couples who do not meet social norms of heteronormativity and monoraciality. Abdullah described his parents’ reaction to his sexual orientation as follows:

When they thought that I was gay, or after I told that I was gay, and they thought they are losing me to this sin, they tried to say, “okay, you don’t have to marry the perfect Arab woman, we’re okay with you marrying a white woman” … They relaxed the rules to try and get me back, to come back to their side.

For Abdullah, being in an interracial relationship was seen as less of a transgression than being gay.

As a counterpoint, Black and white couples I interviewed had a more nuanced and different response, which shows the impact of racial hierarchy and prevalence of anti-Black racism in Canada and outside. Researchers have argued that Black and white is a harder boundary to cross when it comes to mixed unions. Even for LGBTQ couples, Black–white couples perceived their interracial status as marking them in terms of how people react to their interraciaity. The power of anti-Black racism dominated the experiences of these couples.
The two Black and white lesbian couples in my study discussed the ways in which their mixed race and sexual status affected the way their family and community treated them as a couple. Roq and Amber are a Black and white Lesbian couple, who describe their experience here:

Roq: Being queer is definitely secondary to life, like, my – the colour of my skin trumps everything, like, it really does. I always hold her hand no matter what, like, if we’re in a small town or whatever. It’s the race thing that they’re going to see that and, like, react to that more than they are going to us being a queer couple, right? [Amber nods.] Like, for me, like this is how I see it. I think I’ll be constantly queer with her. I think – because race plays such a, us being an interracial couple. It – it’s just so visual, right? And so, the reactions are going to be that first and foremost. I don’t think – I think, again, the queer thing is just totally secondary.

Her white partner Amber adds:

Amber: I’m white, my queerness is more of a – is more of a vulnerability, obviously, than my skin colour. I don’t feel very – well, it’s a product of where I’m at now. I felt a lot more vulnerability in my queerness earlier in my life, but because I can navigate the world without being read as queer. And so that idea of passing, which is interesting in contrast to race, right? Because there’s no option, as Roq said, like, she can never be invisible.

Their self-description and analysis are quite nuanced, as Amber and Roq are of the opinion that the visual difference between them as a couple is more immediately noticeable. Their public displays of affection, like holding hands, make them instantly visible as a queer couple. They believe that their status as interracial is more of a shock for people. They are conscious of how people’s racialized gaze is immediately directed towards Roq’s body as a Black woman. Amber stresses the racialized visibility that Roq experiences, and she contrasts it with her own experience of being a white person who has the option to pass as non-queer and normative. It appears their experience and awareness of how the public gaze is turned towards their racialised bodies is the reason they believe their interraciality is more significant than their queerness when
they are in public. Although they talk about the effect of race on each of them as individuals, the focus is on how race plays out in their relationship as an LGBTQ couple.

As these examples suggest, Black and white couples in my study appear to be more aware of their interracial status. This may have to do both with the presumed unusualness of a Black and white couple, given the smaller numbers of Black people in Vancouver. According to Statistics Canada, “very few residents (1.3 per cent of the population) come from countries in Africa and fewer still (1.2 per cent) are racialized as Black” (Statistics Canada, 2016, reported in Creese, 2020, p. 176). The experiences of Roq and Amber show how racial hierarchies work by placing Black and white on the opposite ends of the spectrum. Blacks are placed on the bottom of the racial hierarchy. Anti-blackness has been a significant part of upholding the racial hierarchy, as scholars like Bonilla-Silva (2006) have argued. For Bonilla-Silva (2006), a triracial system of racial hierarchy has emerged in North America, which will be comprised of “whites” at the top, an intermediary group of “honorary whites” in the middle, including Latinos and Asians, and the “collective black” at the bottom.

Black participants and couples with Black partners emphasized the impact of race on their everyday experience more than other participants in my study. I would argue that this is due to the nature of anti-Black racism faced by Black people in Vancouver. Although Vancouver is diverse, the low number of Blacks exacerbates their racialization (Creese, 2020). Creese’s (2019b; 2020) research shows that the low numbers of migrants with African descent in Vancouver creates a situation where they are constantly identified as “foreigners” and “outsiders.”
Roq remarked on the smaller numbers of Black people in Vancouver. When she compared Vancouver to Toronto, she discussed her experiences as a Black woman navigating everyday life in the city:

When I went to Toronto, I hadn’t realized that I didn’t stand out. And so, my whole body had this reaction, I felt so – I felt like my best self when I was there. There were people that, like, there was so many different shades and growing up in, like, a very light community and then coming to Vancouver where I am surround by white men … And I realized that I had been around white so much! I hadn’t been around so many Black bodies or Brown bodies. It was awesome.

Roq’s wife Amber mentioned that Roq told her that “in Toronto my skin feels different.” They both believed that Toronto would be a better fit for Roq because she felt hypervisible in Vancouver. They were thinking of moving to Toronto after a few years. When I interviewed Amber individually, she told me that going through the couple interview with Roq had made it clear to her how important it was for Roq to live in a city where she saw herself. She said that she was looking for jobs in Toronto.

In her essay “phenomenology of whiteness,” Ahmed (2007) discusses the experience of inhabiting a white space in a non-white body. As she explains it, certain spaces are oriented towards white bodies and when non-white people inhabit these spaces, they “feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space” (p. 157). These non-white bodies either have to make themselves invisible to pass or they are rendered hypervisible and set apart. Although Ahmed’s (2007) analysis focuses on the white and non-white binary, I would argue that it applies aptly to the experience of Black bodies in white dominated spaces. Vancouver prides itself on being a multicultural space inviting a diversity of bodies. Roq expressed how her Black body experienced discomfort and a sense of being out of place in Vancouver.
Roq’s experience is informed by the small numbers of Blacks in Vancouver, and anti-Black racism prevalent in Vancouver and Canada (see, Creese, 2020; 2019b). This is exacerbated by a racial hierarchy that places Blacks at the bottom (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Kim’s (1999) concept of “racial triangulation” in the U.S. context explains that “the racialization of Asian Americans has been carried out not independently from other racial groups, but rather in interaction with whites and blacks” (cited in Kubo, 2010, p. 269). Both Blacks and Asians are racialized as inferior to whites; Asians are racialized as perpetual and unassimilable foreigners, but also valorised as a model minority, and compared favourably to Blacks. These two communities are pitted against each other to justify and sustain white racial domination.

In comparison to couples with Black partners, other couples felt relatively less conspicuous for being a mixed couple in Vancouver. For example, one of the participants, Eric, a white man married to an Asian man, remarked that as a couple, they did not receive a lot of attention for their mixedness in Vancouver. But he added, “I would make a distinction that because we are a white/Chinese couple that is much less obvious to go apparently than if we were particularly a Black/white couple.” Other studies have also remarked on Black and white intermarriage as being received with more surprise and hostility than other racial combinations (Childs, 2009; Yancy, 2007). Yancy (2007) argues that interracial marriages between whites and Blacks differ from interracial marriages with whites and non-Black, because the couples with a Black partner are likely to face greater racial hostility.

One of my Black lesbian respondents directly called out the racial hierarchy. She claimed that the hostility towards interracial couples was also the result of social stigma against Blackness. Tamara said:

Accepting of a couple that is interracial more than a fully Black couple that people can’t continue … Say sort of if there is a disconnect with the understanding of a fully Black
couple or a non-white couple. It’s hard to figure out what I’m saying because it’s not a fully formed thought, but I think that, we are more acceptable to the people because we are an interracial couple.

Tamara claims that interracial couples may then be shown greater acceptance than a Black couple. According to her, even Black and white couples maybe more acceptable than Black couples, in spite of a long history of social opposition and hostility against them (Kennedy, 2004). This ties into what I am calling the “legitimizing effect” of having a white partner and what this can mean for people of colour. Several of my participants reported that being with a white partner can enable the partner of colour to be more legitimate in the social sphere. Both heterosexual and LGBTQ couples described the legitimisation effect of whiteness.

Legitimizing effect of a white partner was recounted by several participants in my study, and I present a few examples below. Abdullah described the legitimating role played by his white male partner, Tanner. He stated:

He [Tanner] legitimizes me! A white person legitimises a non-white person in a relationship … In North America you’re no longer an inferior, you are now equal because you’re in a relationship with a white person. That stereotype exists out there; Tanner legitimises me. There are people out there who interacts, white people out there who only interact with white people for the most part. They don’t have great diverse circle of friends. I don’t find that I’m welcome into those people’s social circle. But because of dating Tanner, I find that allows me that access.

Abdullah explains how being with Tanner gives him access to social circles, which are dominated by white people. According to him, being with a white person makes other white people treat a person of colour as an equal. It is widely believed that increasing numbers of interracial couples signify reducing social distance between different social groups and greater integration of immigrants and minorities in the social mainstream (Alba & Nee, 2003; Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2015; Song, 2009; Törngren et al., 2016). Abdullah’s comment suggests
that this form of reasoning supports the perception of people of colour partnered with white people as better integrated. Such a perception may translate into their being accepted in white dominated social circles. This *legitimization effect* was also reported by several heterosexual couples in my study. For example, Nina, a South Asian woman married to a white man, explained:

> I have a big group of friends who are from, a lot of white friends too and I think being with him kind of puts my white friends at ease. I don’t know why it is. I’m not saying that’s the reason why, but I have access to another group of people because of being married to him that people who wouldn’t talk to me.

Here Nina, like Abdullah, suggests that being with a white man meant she was acceptable amongst other white people who would otherwise not welcome her into their social circles. The effect of legitimacy acquired by people of colour who are with a white partner make them more socially acceptable. This ties in well with Twine’s (2010) description of how whiteness acts as a resource in certain situations. In her study, white parents become advocates for their mixed-race kids in school. In my study, white people helped their partners of colour to be accepted more easily in white dominated social circles and in spaces that might otherwise be closed to people of colour.

### 6.2 Race in Queer Spaces: A Minority within a Minority?

Apart from the Black and white couples, most of the couples I interviewed asserted that to them their LGBTQ status is more important than their mixed racial status. However, being interracial became significant to their experience when they reflected about their place in Vancouver’s LGBTQ community. Many felt that the gay community in Vancouver is dominated by white gay
men, and this limits the acceptance for mixed queer couples. As Jon, a white man married to Max, a Middle Eastern man, explained:

I feel like there is a community that doesn’t know what to do with us. If you look at the “A” gays, [which he described as elite gays] this sort of, not that we would need to be a part of it, but they sort of echelon of basically what feels like all Caucasian couples or gay men, because we don’t look like them. There is not an automatic exclusion, but there is not an act for inclusion because I think we don’t fit the mold.

Whiteness was the dominant norm within the gay community in Vancouver, which made couples like Jon and Max feel excluded from the mainstream, thus making their mixedness visible and salient. Whiteness operates as an advantageous form of sexual capital that favours white gay men.

Several mixed-race couples reported racism within the gay community. For example, Jon’s partner, Max described an incident:

It was LGBTQ event. And some white dude said something to this Arab guy that really offended me: “Here is another Arab boy looking for sugar daddy or something.” I was like, “What are you talking about? … But because it wasn’t against me and we were not the host, I just had to let it go.

LGBTQ communities are often seen as progressive and inclusive, but as Max’s experience indicates, racism remains prevalent in the construction of hierarchies of desirability and in practices of exclusion visible in the articulation of sexual preferences that explicitly excludes certain racial groups (Robinson, 2015).

Racialized desire (Rothmüller, 2019) can be defined as “desire influenced by racial and ethnic ideologies regarding sexuality and degrees of attractiveness as grounds for racial and ethnic status.” Thus, desire can amplify existing racial inequalities. Jon reacts to these forms of exclusion:
When I was on a dating website, and we’d see all these “no Asians.” Those are the things I saw all the time, “No Asian, no Asians.” And I thought, “why won’t you …” Oh my God, how terrible how that must feel to be Asian and going through all that and see that as well as how unfortunate for any of those people that would say “No Asian,” what the people that they would miss out on.

Similarly, Dean, a mixed-race man in relationship with Robbie, a Mexican-Latino man, expresses his view on this:

Especially in the gay community, like you hear guys are discounted, or guys just make fun of his race. You don’t want to necessarily date somebody. You don’t want to go meet up with them or like have a dinner with them, like you’ll see often, like “white only” or so. I feel like it’s pretty big in the gay community. There is, there are some big race issues. Yeah. There are people who hate themselves for their own races. There are people who wish they were another one. There were people who only want to date Asian men, right? So, we definitely know ourselves and our friends and we made jokes about who has a type. But underneath that, it was a serious topic, right?

As these examples suggest, interracial couples confront racism within the gay community, which often treats them as exceptional and outside the racial norm. These experiences may differ based on the racial composition of the couple. As I discussed earlier, blackness shapes how interracial couples are perceived and how Black and white couples experience their racial mixedness. It seems many couples see their LGBTQ status as receiving more negative attention among heterosexuals, but within the gay community their mixedness becomes a source of exclusion. Thus, we see how the intersections of sexuality and race produce inequality and vulnerability in practice. LGBTQ communities have struggled for recognition and equality in a heteronormative society, but racial hierarchies are also pervasive in these communities.
6.3 Negotiating Heteronormativity: Being in an Interracial and Gay Relationship in a Heteronormative World

LGBTQ couples live in a heteronormative world where certain social expectations place them outside the norm. Although this is often viewed to be a source of negative attention, this can also be liberating in terms of how social expectations play out. Couples can take more considered decisions, which are in some ways less constrained by expectations. Sandy, for example, a white woman married to a Black woman, Tamara, states:

Well, it’s interesting being gay because I guarantee before I came out, my parents’ ideal mate for me was a white guy, and so once I’d blown that out of the water, I think it really opened things up.

Similarly, Dean, who is a mixed-race man partnered with Robbie, a Latino man, says:

I feel like culturally in the straight land, there are more family pressures to marry within the race. Whereas in gay land, you’ve already given the big middle finger to your family and so I’m not going to subscribe to your expectation or your idea of who should I marry. So, we’ve already cut that out of the picture, but in straight land, if the family has a big presence in your life, and if you are close to your culture, and close to your parents, and it’s important to them that you marry somebody of the same race so that the kids are the same race, or you are in the same religion, so you continue the family name and the traditions and the culture. I feel like there’s probably more a family pressure involved in a heterosexual relationship because we’ve already thrown away the pressures and we’ve already told our families to evolve.

Emma, a white transwoman in a relationship with May, an Asian woman, agrees:

As far as like mixed couples in gay relationships, like it’s super common. Because you’ve already like, usually if there’s any cultural nonsense, you’ve already had to push through that to come out as gay in the first place, so you’re not going to carry that with you when you’re looking for a partner.

Thus, in some ways it appears LGBTQ couples, by virtue of already having rejected society’s heteronormative expectations, can be more open to mixed-race relationships. The 2006 census
reported that 9.8% of same sex couples were mixed while only 3.8% of opposite sex couples were mixed (Milan et al., 2010). Being outside of a heteronormative relationship allows for certain freedoms from expectations. For example, what a romantic relationship entails can itself be more malleable, as Tanner, who is partnered with Abdullah, explains:

Going through the process of coming out, it was an opportunity for me to reassess how I choose to define an ideal relationship for myself, or what expectations I had for a relationship with others. I think through that process of analysis or exploration, a diversity of options came apparent to me that I previously not considered. So, I can think of relationships prior to that, particularly the longest one I had, which was for seven years, it was a strictly monogamous relationship. Which up to that point, I had assumed, was a universal expectation. But having moved to downtown Vancouver, as a single person at that point, and also currently in the process of coming out and meeting a whole diversity of new people with a very broad range of ideas and subjects, opened my eyes to relationships that appeared to be highly successful but non-traditional.

This discussion shows that LGBTQ relationships are outside the traditional normative mold. This is also in a context when they have historically been denied legitimacy and rights. However, in a context of marriage equality, conforming to heteronormative norms can often become an expectation tied to legitimation.

Some couples discussed how it was important for them to get recognition from their family and community. This is even more significant for mixed couples who are required to perform and express legitimacy, as responses from several of my participants demonstrate. Couples saw the institution of marriage as a social imposition, but at the same time it provided benefits. Eric, a white Canadian man, and Vid, an Asian Canadian man who emigrated from South East Asia, had been married for over 13 years at the time of the interview. They described their decision to get married:

Vid: We got married shortly after we became legal.
Eric: We did not move in together until we got married, which seems terribly heteronormative, but yes.

Vid: I finally wrote to my family an email saying that – stating that this is important to me, not to be taken lightly, this is – finally found somebody that I want to spend the rest of my life with and it’s important not to be taken lightly. So, I think I got the point, they kind of realized this is not just a fly by night affair.

Similarly, Sandy talks about why she and Tamara decided to get married:

One day, Tamara came to me and said, “You know, honey, if we are going to have kids … it’s going to be awful for them. They are going to have Black mom and a white mom, and they are going to have two moms and it will be – it will be easier for them if we just get married because we are having a legally affirmed family will make things easier.” Though we didn’t have kids we got married.

Thus, for these couples, mixedness and queerness overlapped in ways that made marriage a way of deriving societal legitimacy. Some of the participants also felt that marriage meant that the relationship would be accorded similar status as with heterosexual relationships. For example, Max asserted, “Why did we want to call our relationship a marriage? Because like I said, I wanted to get equal recognition.” He was talking about his relationship being recognized on par with those of his straight siblings. Thus, it appears that marriage, as an institution remains an ideal for a romantic relationship in the queer context. Marriages works as a source of legitimacy for queer couples who are marginalised in a heteronormative context.

Multiple hierarchies come into play as sexuality and race interact in the lived experiences of LGBTQ interracial couples. Being both interracial and queer is seen as transgressing social norms in multiple ways. Being queer faces strong social scrutiny and overt opposition. However, the experience of Black and white couples underlines the racial hierarchy where blackness is at the bottom. To put it bluntly, being interracial and heterosexual is more accepted than being LGBTQ, and interracial and being interracial is more acceptable if it does not include a partner.
who is Black. The ideal interracial couple includes a white partner, and their whiteness has a legitimization effect on the couple making them more socially acceptable. I would argue that anti-Black racism is so prevalent that in a certain context a Black couple may be placed below a Black and white couple.

The fact that many of the participants felt that being queer meant they faced more negative attention from the wider community could also be due to the fact that individually, several of them had to embrace their queer identity through a process of coming out where they faced opposition from family and community, who asked them to reconsider their decision and constantly interrogated their queerness. As an individual person of colour, one’s racial identity is not questioned in the same way as a sexual preference. By contrast, one may have to assert one’s sexual identity. This was argued most strongly by one of my participants, Emma, a transwoman in a lesbian relationship. She claimed being interracial is only so important to them as a couple, but being trans and gay to her has meant having to constantly fend off questions about her sexual and gender identity.

Expectations related to gender and sexuality intersect in myriad ways presenting new challenges in different contexts. Tamara identifies as “centre of masculine” as she believes that femininity and masculinity exist on a spectrum, and she falls somewhere in the middle. She describes how the Black community in Vancouver relates to her queerness. She often faces criticism for non-conformity from both Black and queer communities. She said:

Sometimes, because I am more masculine presenting. So therefore, I do – especially in times when people are more fearful of me, people – I think the – it’s hard to separate my masculine centre from my – from being Black. So, I don’t know what people are reacting

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4 Racial identity can also be ambiguous, and there may be a mismatch between how one identifies and how one is identified by others. This can lead to situations when one may have to assert one’s racial identity, and this is often experienced by multiracial people (Mahtani, 2014).
to. But I do think people think that – people react more negatively because I am both of these things, but also rudely enough, I get a backlash from both sides. So, I get a “Black lash” sort of a little bit from Black people because I don’t necessarily present as what we are expected to be presenting as such, like if female Black person are supposed to do their hair up, like wear – be basically very femi-feminine. And because I don’t fit in that stereotype, sometimes I do get a bit of “Black lash” from the Black community. But since I run under gay community, it doesn’t matter because I – that’s how I present to people who don’t care so much.

Tamara’s experience puts into focus the problem of what Crenshaw (1989) calls “single-axis framework” that contributes to the marginalization of Black women in feminist theory and in antiracist politics (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). Tamara’s race and gender intersect and shape her experience as a queer Black woman who is “centre of masculine.” As she puts it, the Black community disapproved of her queerness and gender presentation while the rest of the world reacted unfavourably to her blackness. Tamara believed that people were “fearful” of her as a Black woman because she had a masculine gender presentation. Tamara’s blackness and her failure to adhere to feminine gender presentation turned her into a figure that engendered fear because she did not fit the normative expectations of race, gender, or sexuality. Tamara’s experience demonstrates how the categories of race, gender, and sexuality intersect producing specific relations of domination and marginalization.

Heteronormative expectations are also tied to gender roles and performance. Among queer couples too there is an expectation around gender roles based on gender presentation. Sandy, Tamara’s wife, discusses the stereotypical expectations from her own marriage. She said:

Our stereotypes aren’t about being a mixed couple. Our stereotypes are how we present ourselves more than that, but people think that if we had a house I would mow the lawn, I wouldn’t mow the lawn. It’s based on gender presentation … Any stereotypes that we experience are much more related to being gay and having different gender presentations, like I’m unbeknownst to you now because I’m in my gym clothes, but I do tend to present
a lot more feminine, and Tamara presents a lot more masculine, and so there’s assumptions made about – as she was suggesting, like we call them the pink jobs and the blue jobs. Like domestic labour, lots of people make assumptions about those things, which are entirely untrue in our case. Also, for sure, assumptions around like sex and how that works is related to gender presentations, which are also untrue in our case, but I feel like it’s unrelated to race for the most part.

Similarly, Eric, who is white and married to Vid, an Asian man, describes the visit of his husband’s mother:

Eric: I still remember when his mother visited the house, this house – and she just kind of said, I wonder who’s going to do the cleaning?
Vid: It’s neither of us.

These examples show that in a heteronormative world, gender and sexuality intersect in significant ways to shape social expectations on queer couples. The expectations from traditional gender roles for a man and a woman in a relationship are also placed on queer couples, and many resist them.

Emma talked about how these gendered expectations played out in her relationship with May. May’s mother expected Emma to assume the role and responsibilities of a male partner in a traditional heterosexual relationship.

Emma: If I was a nice white guy, everyone would be super excited about it, because!
May: That’s so true. So, then I think gender plays a lot in the meeting between her and my mom, so … she was like, “Okay, so is she going to help you pay for your student loans?” I was like, “Why is she helping me pay my student loan?” Because for her culturally couples should work together and for the male partner in a relationship has to take certain responsibilities.

May’s mother wanted her to have a male partner, but her coming out as gay meant May’s mother had to refigure who her daughter’s future partner would be. She still wanted her partner to fulfil the male role of a provider and take care of her financial needs. The gender stereotypes associated with straight couples are imposed here on a queer relationship.
6.4 Stereotypes About Interracial Couples: Racialized and Gendered Expectations

Omi and Winant (1994) state that “race is gendered, and gender is racialized” (p. 68). The stereotypes circulating about interracial couples are deeply gendered and highlight intersections between race, gender and sexuality that come to frame the social experiences for mixed couples. A number of stereotypes about mixed couples are connected to specific configurations of the race and gender of the partners involved in these relationships. Even those couples who denied being publicly type-casted themselves were aware of the dominant ideas about race and gender that affected how they were perceived. Couples discussed these stereotypes, which ranged from mildly annoying to demeaning. For example, some couples considered it mildly annoying that people would say that their babies would be the “best” or “the cutest,” assuming that an unusual racial mix would be more appealing. Gay couples reported similar reactions even when they would not have a biological child together. This might be seen as a dominant expression of heterosexism where couples are seen as reproductive. Couples felt this was suggesting that mixed-race children were somehow out of the norm, but they did not think it was harmful.

Often stereotypes were more serious and amplified ideas about racial characteristics that people have, which are then also connected to their gender. Couples talked about how stereotypes about mixed couples were based on a certain race and gender composition. The expectation was often for the male partner to be white and the female partner to be a woman of colour. This would align the axes of dominance: whites over other races and men over women. The female partner who would be a woman of colour would be expected to be submissive. For example, Sheila, who is a Chinese-Canadian woman and married to Earl for over forty years, reported that her husband is often congratulated by his male white friends for being lucky to have a Chinese wife who would take good care of him. Earl discusses these remarks:
I always said Sheila has got a hell a lot more steel in her bones and her makeup than I do. I have always been aware that if I didn’t, if I wasn’t a good husband to her, I would be out the door. There is nothing at all about that stereotype about it, but it is there. People see the two of us and say, “You must be the, you know, man of the house and she is the docile one.” Yes, they are out there and it’s the ones that think of her as being the China doll. The cute little thing.

Earl explains how prevailing racialized gender stereotypes make people assume that because he is a man and white, he dominates his wife Sheila in their relationship, and she is submissive to him. Earl clarified that Sheila was nothing like the stereotypical image of a “China doll,” who was docile to her husband, and that their relationship functioned only because he was a good husband to her.

Gina, a white Canadian woman, married to Phil, a Mexican man, told me that although her whiteness makes her attractive to his family, especially in a context where lighter skin is prized, his parents disapproved of her because she did not subscribe to the traditional gendered expectations for a wife’s role. Gina explained:

The only way of any sort of racial component would come in would be maybe that when they [Phil’s parents’] are kind of thinking in their in their minds of – “Oh, we’ll, like he’s doing a lot of housework and stuff, like, what if he was with a Mexican woman? He won’t be needing to do that work.

Specific stereotypes shaped how people perceived the motives that mixed couples had for being in a mixed relationship instead of a mono-racial one. Katy, who is Chinese Canadian, said that she feels people may think her fiancé Ralph, who is white, has “yellow fever,” or a fetishized attraction towards Asian women. Although it has been mentioned to her once as a joke, she thinks it is harmful because she saw this action as an attempt to discredit the authenticity of her relationship. Other Asian–white couples also reported their relationship being described in these terms, imputing certain motives to their relationship.
Anita, who is a white woman dating an Asian man, talked about how she has dated a number of non-white men, and she has been teased for it and told that she may have a fetish for men of colour. She said:

I guess if you only date people within your own background, like being white, then if someone goes outside that, you immediately think, you can immediately think that “Oh this person, they just have a fetish for Asians,” well as “No, I just met this person,” it’s a nice person!

Anita believed that this was also related to gender, as white men dating Asian women was more common and did not attract as much attention. Her partner Kris, a Korean-Canadian man, related this to the racialization of Asian men, who were seen as feminine and not adequate as men, and a white woman with an Asian was always a sight forinspection.

The other way around is, “this guy must have a lot of money,” it’s the other way around, I find, that’s the negative stereotype. Like “this person, this person’s rich” is so demoralizing because it’s like this person obviously has no personality, or “this person isn’t good enough as a standalone individual.” It’s because of his wealth that attracted her.

These stereotypes draw on race and gender and assign motives and experiences to mixed race couples, while monoracial couples would not face such scrutiny.

Michelle, a Chinese-Canadian woman engaged to Chad, a white Canadian man, mentioned that they have not received a lot of scrutiny as a mixed couple. But if the gender were reversed and it was about an Asian man being with a white woman, people would assume that the man must be very lucky. To have a white partner is viewed as an achievement:

I know out there a stereotype that an Asian man cannot or is harder to obtain a partner if they are interested in first to identify as female who are Caucasian and that seems to be some sort of goal to attain to or like prize. Like you have scored if you end up with a blue eyes, blond hair Caucasian woman and there is a ton of stuff out there … like I saw this Asian dude with this like blond hottie, I wonder what he did to score that. I would say people are more impressed when that happens and not that it should be something that one
should be impressed about. Then they assume it’s very easy for a Caucasian man to like – physically attract an Asian woman.

Michelle’s statement shows the intersections of race and gender, as the difference between Asian and white couples is tied to both the race and gender of their partners. At the same time, it hints at the tendency to assume that getting a white partner was a “score” for an Asian person, both men and women. This finding about value of whiteness in romantic partnerships is consistent with other research in the area (Nemoto, 2009). Whiteness becomes a quality that is desirable and could be attained through a romantic relationship. Michelle believed that these ideas were shaped by what society teaches us to be attractive. Her partner Chad thought that women were often attracted to men who were taller or stronger because that suits a male gender ideal, and Asian men were stereotypically represented as nerdy and intellectual, which was not representative or true, but continued to shape public imagination.

The racial composition of the couple determined what kind of stereotypes they faced. Sandy and Tamara, a white and Black lesbian couple, reported being told as a joke that their relationship was “jungle fever,” suggesting that they were drawn to each other purely for sexual attraction. Frankenberg (1993) discussed how dominant discourses of sexuality racialize people of colour “as excessive, animalistic, or exotic in contrast to the ostensibly restrained or civilized sexuality of white women and men” (p. 75). It appears using derisive terms like “jungle fever” for a Black and white relationship places it as deviant and outside the norms of civility. Dina, a white woman married to a Black man, described people’s reaction to her relationship:

So when I first told my friends that I had met this man, this is a white woman saying that she’s met this Black man, and so like there is all of this like weird kind of like sexualized stuff around Black men, and so there were definitely a few comments which people would have felt were positive comments, right, relating to the sexuality or sexualisation of Black men, like yeah, like people congratulating me, which is awkward and uncomfortable and well-meaning but kind of unwarranted generally.
Dina’s reflections relate to the hypersexualization of Black men in popular culture, which is problematic even when used as a joke or a compliment. Sexuality has historically been deployed in defense of racism, as Black men were constructed as hypersexual and a sexual threat as potential rapists of white women in dominant discourses (Collins, 2005). In this case, how Dina’s friends reacted to her relationship with a Black man reflected sexual and racial stereotypes circulating about Black men.

Terms like *Yellow fever* and *jungle fever* have traditionally been used to explain why white individuals would choose an Asian or Black partner, with the underlying assumption that it was driven by a desire to fetishize the other or for their racial difference, which would make the encounter exotic or exciting for the white individual. At one level it casts aspersions on the white partner’s romantic motives, but also places them as choosing to be with a person of colour. The agency lies with the white partner to initiate such a relationship while the person of colour is set aside as the passive partner who would agree to it due to the assumed desirability of a white partner.

Amber, a white woman partnered with Roq, a Black woman, described how people reacted to her relationship:

One of things that really shocked me and sort of there’s some delayed anger like, out of the shock was at – when I first started dating Roq, I had a friend ask me about what sex was like with Black women? I certainly didn’t entertain it as a valid question. I’m trying to remember exactly how I, like, pushed back because they do expect that kind of racism to come from this friend who’s white. I mean, she’s – yeah, she’s overtly racist regularly, like, about her dating preferences and around race and – yeah. Anyway, so that was the stereotype that was new for me to experience. And I wonder – so she’s the person who said it out loud, but it makes me think that there are other people who aren’t saying it out loud.
Here again we see how Black and white relationships, both straight and queer, were perceived through the prism of sexual stereotypes which are gender and race coded.

Public assumption of who has power in a relationship is often based on such stereotypes and is often complicated by how far a couple moves from the heterosexual, monoracial norm. Dean, a multiracial man who is dating Robbie, a Latino-Mexican man, talks about this:

There’s always a power dynamic. I find that the stereotype is the more powerful one is usually [the] Caucasian one, either with finance or with just power in general. Since neither of us is Caucasian. I don’t think there’s an expectation that one of us has more power together … But in our current situation, it’s actually the opposite because I’m working and he’s learning, so – but I don’t think that there’s an expectation either, or if it’s the gender in the same-sex couple because that’s going to be different now with the hetero couples because the expectation is the male probably makes more money or earns more money and has more power.

These stereotypes shaped how people thought about LGBTQ couples. For instance, Jon described how people tend to assume that he has more power in the relationship and perhaps earns more or supports his partner, as his whiteness was attached to wealth and dominance. The same expectation was reported by Amber and Roq, a Black and white lesbian couple, as mediating people’s reactions towards them as a couple.

A certain stereotype that was discussed by couples was assuming that the white partner would eventually leave. Nina, who is a South Asian woman married to a white man, talked about how her parents told her they will support her even if he leaves her:

If he doesn’t support you, we will support you for the rest of your life and stuff, but it was interesting that kind of, it’s like a patriarchal move, you know. It’s “Oh, he’s going to divorce you at some point.”

This also worked when the gender was reversed, as Rajesh, a South Asian man, was warned by his parents against his white girlfriend, citing the risk of divorce. Even in the case of a queer
couple, May, who is Taiwanese, was told by her mother that her Canadian girlfriend Emma “will play with you and leave you.” This discourse has to do with the higher rate of divorce in some countries than others, but it is also informed by the assumption that mixed relationships have less chances of surviving in the long term. This kind of perception is also linked with the ideas about yellow fever and jungle fever describing mixed relationships in terms of exotic experiences which seek novelty but are unlikely to last.

The racial and gender make up of these couples make them susceptible to different forms of stereotypes based on assumptions about characteristics of people from different racial groups, which intersects with their gender and sexuality. These stereotypes also exist among LGBTQ couples as their relationships are also filtered through a heteronormative lens.

6.5 Conclusion

The participants discussed these stereotypes broadly, including their experiences and assumptions about how mixed couples are perceived in contemporary Canadian society. Through these conversations I observed how race, gender, and sexuality were linked in significant ways as mixed couples navigated their day-to-day life and perceptions and expectations society foists upon them. Racial and gender stereotypes interacted in shaping these. It emerged that whiteness was attached to expectations of higher income and wealth among both LGBTQ and straight couples. However, in straight couples where a person of colour has a white female partner, the assumption was that the male partner may have higher socioeconomic assets, which made it possible for him to be with a white partner. Whiteness became a quality that was desirable in a partner and could be acquired, this was described by some participants as a “score” or “achievement.” However, this was different in cases of couples with a white male partner and a female partner who was a person of colour. It was assumed that a white man would choose a
partner from a different race due to a desire to be with someone more feminine and submissive. Thus, women of colour, especially Asian and South Asian, were seen as more feminine and submissive, and submissiveness and femininity were deemed as desirable qualities in women in a romantic heterosexual context.

These interviews also showed how couples struggled with different aspects of their identity, as being mixed and LGBTQ meant these couples experienced marginalization in different forms. Their LGBTQ status could be more marginalizing in the larger context, but within queer spaces their mixed-race status became a source of exclusion for many. Thus, seemingly progressive spaces are not necessarily accepting of all differences. It appears that these couples navigate multiple axes of privilege and disadvantage based on their individual identities, both chosen and ascribed, as well as who they love, depending on the contexts they inhabit at different moments in time. Race, gender, and sexuality are some of the ways people saw themselves and were seen by others, these categories framed their identities and interacted with each other to shape their lived experiences.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Interviewer: So, what do you think about the rising number of mixed unions in Canada?

Mark: … So, my perspective, being from a dominant culture, is that it is a good thing. It means there is a move towards the average, if you like, move towards the mean. Not that I have a problem with other cultures, but it means there is familiarity amongst young people and mixing through marriages, because move is towards the mean, dominant culture, as opposed to cultures that might seem like stranger, which they don't necessarily understand.

Meera: I don't think that's certainly the sign that it is a good thing. I do think that the notion of everybody being intermixed and then the potential creation of something homogenous that is like a bit of everything is a problem. It is of concern because what happens is that you lose diversity in that. So homogenous isn't a good thing in that respect. … So what I see is there is a difference between couples that come together and intermarry who have strong sense of who they are, and they come together and still hold on to that and pass that onto their children, versus couples where they come together and one partner is really trying to be more dominant and one is disconnected from their own culture and roots; those relationships where the kids don't really know that. That is more troubling and more challenging, particularly are kids. I think of, particularly in terms of race. If you have a person of colour and a white person come together, but that person of colour is really trying to be white and adopt white culture, and they disconnect from that part, but their kids are obviously biracial and experience some of the issues around racism and stuff, but their parents don't really address it or have a conversation about that, that's problematic.

The above excerpts are from my conversation with Mark and Meera at the end of their couples’ interview when I asked them to comment of what they thought about the rising number of mixed unions in Canada. Mark said that he considered the increased number of mixed couples to be a “good thing” because he interpreted it to mean that the distance between different racial groups in Canada was diminishing and people were becoming more alike. This illustrates the perspectives in the literature on mixed couples that consider rising number of such couples as evidence of successful assimilation of difference (Alba & Nee, 2003; Waters & Jiménez, 2005).

Meera, by contrast, did not think the assimilation of difference through intermixing was a “good thing,” as she saw cultural diversity to be valuable. Further, Meera raised the problem of racial difference and inequality, and argued that mixed unions could promote white dominance
instead of challenging it. More specifically, she was worried that people of colour who entered such relationships could be “trying to be white,” and looking to integrate into the “Canadian mainstream.” In the previous chapter, I described how several of my participants who are people of colour reported that they were able to get access and acceptance into certain social circles because they had a white partner who “legitimated them.” Consequently, mixed-race relationships could reinforce racial hierarchies instead of challenging them. Meera also expresses concerns about how children born out of mixed unions may not be taught about race and racism by their parents and may face difficulties when they eventually encounter it. In my interviews, some mixed couples expressed their desire to ‘protect’ their children from conversations about race and racism in society, while others considered it important educate their children about these matters.

I chose these excerpts for this concluding chapter because they underline the dominant discourse on mixed couples and multiracialism which is prevalent in Canada. This discourse celebrates mixed couples as representations of greater integration in society and presents their existence as success of Canadian multiculturalism (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017; Mahtani, 2014). Intermarriage has been called the “litmus test for assimilation” (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 90), and although the prevalence of racial inequalities undermines this assumption, mixed unions continue to be viewed as evidence of integration of minorities in Western societies (Rodríguez-García et al., 2015; Song, 2009; Törngren et al., 2016). In Canada, the national politics of multiculturalism promotes celebration of cultural difference. Empirical research shows that cultural differences are valued by partners in mixed unions (Yodanis & Lauer, 2017). Parents consider plural cultural identities as cultural resources for their mixed children (Le Gall & Meintel, 2015). It is in this broader context that this study is situated. The celebration of mixedness and of integration sets
the backdrop for what is at stake in investigating the lived realities of mixed couples. These couples have become the representatives of a progressive multicultural politics, which minimises the continued prevalence of racial inequalities and hierarchies.

Several participants in my study valued multiculturalism and showed an affective investment in it. It gave them a sense of identity as representatives of a progressive multicultural nation. Many saw multiculturalism as a reflection of their values and aspirations. This fit well with the official discourse of multiculturalism in Canada, and these couples were presented as evidence of a successful multicultural politics. However, their experiences often did not live up to this promising narrative, as I discussed in Chapter 5. The participants who were critical of this policy discussed how it made it harder for them to name and talk about the racism they experienced. Others emphasized the narrow constructions of desirable difference that multiculturalism promotes. A few also pointed out how the focus on multiculturalism makes people of colour carry the burden being cultural in “appropriate” ways. Participants criticized the assumption that the current version of multiculturalism was the best practice to build an inclusive Canadian society. They pointed to how this abiding belief in multiculturalism silenced critique and directed focus away from the durability of racism and the continued oppression of Indigenous people through the policies of settler colonialism. These narratives speak to the specificity of the Canadian context where the promise of multicultural inclusion continues to coexist with the prevalence of racism.

There are few studies on mixed couples in Canada. As such, there is a need for qualitative studies that document the lived realities of mixed couples from a critical perspective, one that scrutinises the assumptions of progressiveness that are often attached to interracial intimacies (Deliovsky & Kitossa, 2017). According to Yodanis and Lauer (2017), very few empirical
studies of intermarriage have used multiculturalism to analyse the phenomenon of mixed-race marriages. In this dissertation I study mixed couples with a focus on race and racism. I have examined how mixed couples engage with race, racial identity, and racism in their everyday life, and how these relationships became sites for negotiating power and contestation.

In this concluding chapter, I will first highlight the contributions this study has made to the literature on interracial intimacy. I will then discuss the limitations and strengths of this study and possible directions for future research.

7.1 Contributions

In this section I present the contributions of my study to the literature on interracial intimacy and to conversations on race and racism in the Canadian context.

1. Racial literacy: Its potential and price in everyday practice

Previous studies (Frankenberg, 1993; Twine, 2010) have highlighted the potential of mixed relationships to enable white partners to develop racial consciousness that can help them confront their own privilege and empathise with the racism that their partners and other people of colour face. The development of such consciousness, as my study reveals, is contingent. In this dissertation, I have used Twine’s (2010) concept of racial literacy to examine how white partners in intimate relationships with people of colour engaged with their own racial privilege. I questioned whether and how they developed an understanding of racism in society by learning from their partners’ experiences, bearing witness, and offering empathy.

Previous studies have largely focused on the experiences of white partners and how they developed racial literacy. By contrast, I examined the role played by the partner of colour in this process. The cultivation of racial literacy for white partners required that partners of colour share
their experiences of racialization, and subject themselves to their partners’ judgement. In some cases, white partners dismissed or minimised their partners’ experiences causing them emotional distress. Even in the cases where white partners managed to develop racial literacy in the form of an awareness of their own racial privilege, including the ability to see race as a structure and offer support and empathy to their partners, they had to continue making efforts to learn and unlearn. Racial literacy could not be acquired as a finished product but required white people to inhabit a space of “continued discomfort.” This was challenging even for white partners with the best intentions and thoughtful commitment. My dissertation shows that being with a partner who was a person of colour did not necessarily lead to racial literacy. Further, racial literacy did not guarantee anti-racist practices of confronting everyday racism and working to dismantle structural forms of racism. A leap from developing an awareness about race and racism to actually taking action to engage in anti-racist work cannot be assumed. For many of my participants, the historical and institutional nature of racial structures were resilient and difficult to challenge, even though some tried to negotiate and resist them in creative and agentive ways.

My investigation of racial literacy through interracial intimacy indicated a clear gender gap. The white men in my study were more reluctant to learn from their partner’s experiences of racialization or offer empathy to them. They used different strategies of “epistemic distanciation” (Yancy, 2001) to avoid accepting the existence of a social system that is built on racial domination and marginalization and the racial privileges they gained from it. I analysed the differences between the responses of white women and white men by focusing on how race and gender intersected and supported racial hierarchy. I used the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) to explain the inability
and unwillingness of white men in my study to encounter their own male privilege or empathise with the experiences of their female partners.

Hochschild’s (2012) theorisation of emotional labour is useful for understanding gender disparities. White women were more willing and able to offer empathy to their partners than white men. Hochschild (2012) argues that women occupy a lower status than men, and therefore they are met with doubt and disbelief when they narrate their experiences of marginalisation. I extend this argument to explain the skepticism met by people of colour when they shared their experiences of racialization. Their subordinate position in the racial hierarchy reduces their ability to narrate their experience on their own terms. Their experiences of racialization are seen as less believable in a context dominated by whiteness.

In this study, I have also focused on how interracial couples contemplated the significance of cultivating racial literacy among mixed-race children as parents or prospective parents. To do so, I follow Twine’s (2010) research, which focuses on white parents raising kids who might be subjected to racialization and how this makes white parents more invested in cultivating racial literacy. I found that many of the couples in my study considered the significance of racial literacy based on the risk of racialization their children may face depending on the colour of their skin. If the child could pass as white, the partners were less worried about them encountering racism. Thus, they did not see the need for equipping their children with the ability to identify and resist racism. The couples in my study were conscious of the advantages of whiteness, and how that could shield their children against racism in a white dominated society.
2. **Intersection of race, sexuality, and gender in forming experiences of mixed couples**

In chapter 6 of this dissertation, I examined the following question: “How do race, gender, and sexuality work together to shape the experiences of mixed couples?” To answer this question, I focused on the experiences of both LGBTQ and heterosexual couples. There are very few academic studies that investigate the everyday experiences of LGBQ interracial couples (Steinbugler, 2012). As my findings suggest, LGBTQ mixed couples negotiate the expectations of both heteronormativity and monoraciality (Steinbugler, 2012).

The couples in my study reported that being an LGBTQ couple had been a more difficult normative transgression for them than being in an interracial relationship. They felt that in comparison to their race, their sexuality was less visible, and this meant that they had to come out to their families and others to defend their identity. LGBTQ couples encountered more skepticism and prejudice from people due to their LGBTQ identity than their interracial partnership. However, Black and white LGBTQ couples reported that being in an interracial relationship was just as significant to them, if not more than their LGBTQ status. It appears that this difference in how white and Black LGBTQ couples experience race compared to other LGBTQ couples is due to the prevailing racial hierarchy that places Blacks and whites at opposing ends of the racial spectrum, with Blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. According to Deliovsksy and Kitossa (2013), “the two groups that ideologically and symbolically typified these categories of whiteness and blackness also represented polar ends of a racial cosmology and hierarchy” (p. 167).

Anti-Blackness contributes to how couples who had a Black partner experienced racism in their lives. This underscores the importance of discussing racial exclusion not only in terms of white and Black, but also in terms of how anti-blackness shapes racial hierarchies more
generally. Anti-blackness might provide a useful point of reference for understanding racial oppression. Several mixed couples who did not include Black partners, mentioned that they believed they would face greater public scrutiny and racial discrimination if one of them were Black. Black people in Vancouver in my study also talked about being hypervisible in public spheres, as they were so few in numbers, compared to Toronto and Montreal (Creese, 2019a). The smaller number of Black people in Vancouver leads to other forms of exclusion: Black people in Vancouver are seen as perpetual foreigners and excluded from a city that seemingly celebrates multiculturalism and diversity (Creese, 2019b).

Several of the mixed-race LGBTQ couples that I interviewed mentioned that they felt excluded from mainstream LGBTQ circles in Vancouver, which they perceived as overwhelmingly white. Racial discrimination, they explained, existed in these seemingly progressive communities. Some couples found themselves in a double bind where they faced exclusions due to both their racial and sexual identities. As one participant described it, she experienced a “backlash” for being Black in gay communities and a “blacklash” for being gay in Black communities.

Similar to Steinbugler’s (2012) findings, several LGBTQ mixed couples in my study described that they were not often read as a couple and became invisible in the public domain. Few of them mentioned using public displays of affection, like holding hands, so they could be identified as a couple. My participants described Vancouver as a “place of safety” and many of them preferred to live in the city of Vancouver because they found it to be more liberal and inviting for LGBTQ couples than the suburbs in metro Vancouver. Many chose specific neighbourhoods in Vancouver based on how friendly they believed these areas were to LGBTQ
couples. Participants argued that communities that were inviting to LGBTQ couples were often also friendly to racial minorities, but some felt that this was not always the case.

Prevailing gender stereotypes shaped expectations and perceptions about interracial couples. White partners were expected to hold more power in interracial relationships: both heterosexual and LGBTQ. People of colour in interracial relationships were often perceived based on the sexual and racial stereotypes that circulate in Canada and other Western countries. For example, Asian women are seen to be submissive, while Black men are sexualized as dominant. Such stereotypes guided perceptions and expectations from significant others and strangers in private and public domains.

The inclusion of LGBTQ couples in this research fills an important gap in the literature on interracial intimacy. The reflections offered by my participants allow us to see how race is sexualized and how sexuality is racialized. The presence of LGBTQ couples also opens important avenues for comparison between LGBTQ and heterosexual mixed couples. This underlines the significance of an intersectional analysis to see how multiple forms of oppression can work together to shape the lived experiences of mixed couples.

3. **Complex meanings of mixedness: The existence of invisible mixed couples**

The idea of mixed unions in the Canadian context is tied to the presence of visible difference between people. Mixed couples are defined in terms of a transgression of social boundaries between white and visible minorities and those belonging to different visible minority groups. As race is socially constructed and an unstable category, the reliance on visible difference to mark racial difference does not always translate into how couples identify themselves. In my study I encountered mixed couples who did not look different but considered themselves to be mixed, and those who would officially be classified as mixed but looked similar.
As I focused on how couples understood and articulated their own sense of being a mixed couple, I noticed that there was a gap between how couples identified themselves and how others categorized them. Some of the couples, like Elizabeth and Otis, and Pepe and Alana, did not see themselves as mixed, despite their racial differences, because of their shared culture and language. However, they were identified as mixed based on their visual differences by others. Dan and Hiromi disagreed with each other whether they should be identified as a mixed couple. Although they may not be seen as a mixed couple based on their appearance, they would be considered a mixed couple based on the official statistical criteria (Milan et al., 2010). Some couples, like the Anglo and Québécois couple, Ann and Jacque, who would not be identified as mixed based on their outward appearance because they are both white, saw themselves as mixed because they believed that their differences emerged from a relationship of dominance and subordination in the Canadian context. There is a difference between their self-conception and identification by others, which goes on to show how difficult it is to draw these lines.

I would like to highlight the case of Jacque and Ann, a Québécois and Anglo-Canadian couple who both identified as white, but still emphasized their mixed status as a couple. Their interest in being a part of a study on interracial couples emerged from their mutual recognition of their differences, which they viewed as more than just cultural in the Canadian context. They recognized that the challenges they faced were different from those of interracial couples, but they wanted to underline how the specific historical context of Canada called for recognizing the Québécois category as different from Anglo-whites. I believe their inclusion in this study highlights the specific history of the Canadian context where Anglo dominance and Québécois marginalization has been historically prevalent. Jacque did not identify with dominant Anglo-
Canadian whiteness. The settler colonial history of Canada allows for further investigation into the fragmented nature of whiteness.

Jacque and Ann saw their differences to be embedded in a system of power and domination similar to a racial hierarchy. By their own admission they did not experience the kind of racial discrimination that mixed-race couples with partners who are people of colour faced. However, they still believed they should qualify as a mixed couple. Their insistence demonstrates a need for further investigation into the experiences of Québécois and Anglo couples in Canada.

Song (2009) has pointed out “the inherently messy business of deciding when intermarriage has (and has not) occurred” (p. 338). As racial boundaries between groups are socially constructed, this adds to the difficulty of defining and demarcating what transgressions look like. In the Canadian context, different forms of intermixing across categories become salient. Alba and Nee (2003) argue that a sign of intermarriage is the crossing of a socially recognized boundary. In case of Jacque and Ann, they believed the boundary between Anglo and Québécois as representative of a boundary marked by historical and contemporary significance in terms of relations of power in the Canadian context, and therefore deserving of consideration.

4. Black and White couples and the impact of anti-Black racism

My interviews with the couples in my study consistently showed that Black and white couples were more conscious of their racial differences than other mixed couples. These couples in my study were more race-conscious and faced greater public scrutiny than did other mixed couples. The couples who participated in my study were conscious of the prevalence of racism in Canada, but they often compared it to other countries, especially the United States, which made Canada appear more inclusive. Many couples were conscious of the fact that the presence of racism in
the United States is an effective way to deflect critical scrutiny from Canada, one that worked in Canada’s favour. Couples believed that racism in Canada was different from the United States in the sense that it was more subtle due to a public discourse that emphasized inclusiveness of the Canadian state and society through multicultural tolerance for difference. Thus, racism became more subtle and harder to confront in their everyday lives.

Black and white couples were the most vocal about the impact of the combination of multicultural tolerance and racism in Canada, as the dominating discourse minimised experiences of racism and the ongoing realities of racial inequality. Black and white couples were also more race conscious than other interracial couples, which in the United States has been attributed by scholars like Yancy (2007) to greater hostility faced by these couples due to the historical legacy of slavery and the legal restrictions against intermingling of Blacks and whites. Kitossa & Deliovsksy (2010) have reported that in the Canadian context, interracial couples with Black partners faced greater hostility and racial surveillance.

Another explanation for the racially conscious experiences of Black and white couples in my study could be the prevalence of anti-black racism in Vancouver and Canada. I argue that anti-Blackness in the Canadian context shaped the experiences of Black participants and their partners in my study and contributed to their racialization and racial consciousness. Creese (2019b) found that Black-identifying African immigrants in Canada, especially in Vancouver, are often seen as foreigners, even when they are born or raised in Canada and choose to identify themselves as Canadian. This is consistent with the experiences of Black participants in my study who felt that their Canadian identity was often not recognised by others, and they were seen primarily as foreign and Black. It appears that it could have contributed to the Black
participants’ ability to be critical of the discourse of multicultural inclusion and Canadian nationalism.

A Black participant in my study made the observation that interracial Black and white couples might be more acceptable than a Black couple in white-dominated contexts in Canada. At first glance this sounded counter-intuitive as Black and white interracial couples are known to arouse negative reactions and face social opposition (Childs, 2005; Kitossa & Deliovskey, 2010; Yancy, 2007). The point that my participant made makes sense in the context of prevalence of anti-Blackness. Her argument is that racial exclusion of Black people is common in Canada, even in seemingly progressive spaces, and Black and white couples might be more acceptable than Black couples due to the “legitimation effect” of the white partner, which may make the Black person more acceptable.

Creese (2019b) has theorised anti-blackness in Canada as “a problem of historical amnesia,” which treats Blacks as new arrivals, setting aside long histories of slavery and migration from the Caribbean. This “marks black bodies as strange and new even if their lineage goes back many generations” (Creese, 2019b, p. 1480). Scholars like Kitossa and Deliovskey (2010) draw attention to anti-blackness in Canada to critique the public discourse celebrating interracial unions and multiracialism. Kitossa and Deliovskey (2010) use the concept of “repressive tolerance” to highlight the gap between public and private lives of Black and white couples: there is a promise of tolerance for such unions in the public sphere, but many Black and white couples have had private experiences of opposition and hostility from family members and strangers. Although other racial minorities also face racialization, the Black and white boundary, which Deliovskey and Kitossa (2013, p. 165) describe as the “Black and white Manicheanism” shapes how other intermediate racial groupings get placed in the racial order. Deliovskey and
Kitossa (2013) are critical of viewpoints in academia and elsewhere that emphasize the need to ‘move beyond a Black and white paradigm’, as they consider it to be fundamental for understanding how race relations function in the Western world. They consider Blackness to be central to how other groups are included in the structure of racial exclusion. Their main critique against this perspective is the tendency to posit Blackness and not whiteness as an “impediment to the laudable goals of a multiracial coalition and complex understanding of race relations” (Deliovsky & Kitossa, p. 172)

Similarly, in the U.S. context, Sexton (2008) has criticized the public discourse and scholarship on interracial and multiracialism of celebrating these relationships and the children born from them as symbols of progress, for failing to see their implication for strengthening whiteness and supporting anti-Blackness. Sexton (2008) points out that these celebratory discourses ignore the histories of slavery and sexual violence inflicted by white men against Black women. He further argues that multiracial heritage of generations of American Black men and women are erased by focusing selectively on the contemporary moment of intermixing. Song (2009) has also argued that intermarriage may signify “the enlargement of the ‘White’ category, leaving Black people in the most racially stigmatised position (p. 343).”

The findings from my study show the relevance of anti-Black racism in shaping the experiences of interracial couples. It calls for greater attention to the varied experiences of interracial couples depending on their racial composition and the local and global racial contexts.

### 7.2 Limitations and Strengths of my Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The obvious limitation of my research is that it is a qualitative study that cannot be easily generalised. However, this study contributes to understanding the everyday experience of mixed-race couples and how racial power articulates itself in interpersonal and intimate relations. My
dissertation offers theoretical insights could be used to design future research studies in a field that is under-researched. The goal of this study has not been statistical representativeness, but analytical strength to explore the how mixed couples make sense of their identity and experiences. There are very few published studies documenting the experiences of interracial couples in Canada, and this area requires further examination.

Although my study includes a wide range of participants with different racial/ethnic backgrounds making the findings harder to generalize, following Yodanis and Lauer (2017, p. 129), an open pool of participants has an advantage because the findings can hold up across a wide range of mixed relationships. Many of my findings, like the legitimation effect produced by a white partner and the emotional labour of cultivating racial literacy, were present across the diversity of my sample. My study is situated in the city of Vancouver, which has a long history of immigration, diversity, progressiveness, and high number of mixed couples. Although Vancouver is not representative of the rest of Canada, I chose it for my interviews because it presents a social context known for multicultural tolerance, and I wanted to see how race and racism worked in a seemingly progressive and inclusive space. As a poster child of diversity and multiculturalism, Vancouver is expected to be a safe space for interracial couples. It was important to investigate how such an expectation matched up to the lived reality of mixed couples. However, there is need for research that would focus on the experiences of mixed couples living outside metropolitan cities where cultural and social norms were more accepting of racial differences. A number of my participants talked about how their experiences could have been very different had they not lived in Vancouver. Several of the couples in this study specifically talked about the relatively progressive “bubble” of Vancouver, which inadvertently shaped their experiences and opinions. Comparative studies that examine the experiences of
mixed couples living in metropolitan and smaller towns in Canada could shed more light on how race and racism works in Canadian society.

In my study I have primarily focused on interracial couples, and even though I used Twine’s (2010) concept of racial literacy, I did not focus on the emergence of racial literacy through parenting practices in mixed-race families. I decided to concentrate on couples because the concept of racial literacy is focused on the journey of white people, and I wanted to shift the focus to consider the role played by people of colour in white peoples’ cultivation of racial literacy. By focusing on couples, I could examine the emotional labour performed by people of colour to get white people to develop racial literacy. By focusing on the participants as couples instead of as parents, I was able to study the tensions and complexities of the process of developing racial literacy more closely and critically. A focus on couples without children can enable greater insights into the dynamics of adult relationships (Yodanis & Lauer, 2017). However, there is value in focusing on racial literacy as a pedagogical practice that parents engage in. I included questions about parenting multiracial children in my interviews, but only a few of my participants had children at the time of my study, so I asked the other couples to reflect on raising children together in the future. I would suggest that future research should look into practices of multiracial families and how they cultivate racial literacy focusing on the role of both white and non-white partners.

I would also suggest comparative research focused on different forms of mixing. My dissertation examined racial intermixture as I was interested in studying how racial difference shaped the lived realities of couples in my study. However, I see the value in comparative research which studies the similarities and differences in experiences of interracial and interethnic couples where both partners identify as white but may have different ethnic identities,
to see how racial and cultural differences are articulated. The need for a study of Québécois–Anglo couples which focuses on settler colonial power would also be very revealing. As I mentioned earlier, such a study would help to understand the spectrum of whiteness in the Canadian context by focusing on the dynamics between Anglo and Québécois couples.

As Mahtani (2014) reminds us, and my research also shows, there continues to be a lack of scholarship on mixed couples who do not have white partners. I set out to include more non-white interracial couples in my study, but I only had a few participants who fit this description. Additional research that focuses on interracial couples without white partners has the potential for generating comparative insights with existing research. For example, what kind of discussions on racism and racial identity would come up in everyday experiences of mixed couples where both partners are people of colour? What would racial literacy mean in this context?

I used intersectional analysis in this study to see how race, gender, and sexuality played a part in shaping the experiences of interracial couples. There is need for more intersectional and comparative research in the field of interracial intimacy. For example, comparative research building on the findings from my study could further explore the significance of gender differences between white men and women in interracial relationships with regards to their ability to cultivate racial literacy. I have not explicitly engaged with social class in my intersectional analysis. Race, gender, and sexuality dominated the interviews I had with my participants. This could be due to the fact that a majority of my participants came from middle class backgrounds. Another study could focus on class differences between the couples, or the role social class plays in forming the racial habitus these couples belong to. Most of my
participants had some university or college education, and this influenced the way they talked about race and the need for racial inclusion.

Another issue that is central to the Canadian context, but not as present in this study, is settler colonialism and racialization of Indigenous people in Canada. Indigenous people were mentioned by participants in this study when they talked about the prevalence of racism in the Canada context. I did not have any participants with indigenous heritage in my sample, and this research has not specifically engaged with the issue of settler colonialism. I refer to it when I raise the theme of multiculturalism and nation-building in Canada. One reason for this is the literature on interracial couples that I used to frame my study comes mostly from the US context, and it focuses on race in terms of slavery and immigration. I could have made efforts to recruit Indigenous participants in my study, but that kind of inclusion would have been additive. Future research should look into the experiences of Indigenous couples in mixed relationships. Mahtani (2014) has pointed out how “multiracial amnesia” in the Canadian conversation on intermixing and multiracialism ignores the histories of intermixing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and focuses instead on mixed couples and that include visible minorities and whites. According to Mahtani (2014), the current focus on mixed-race people ignores Métis and the challenges they have faced with settler colonialism and racism in Canada. Another study could address these questions through empirical research.

7.3 Concluding Remarks

The opening vignette from my conversation with Meera and Mark reveals the contradictory views on intermixing that these two participants articulated. While Mark was supportive of mixed relationships as long as they reduced social distance and encouraged social integration, Meera was worried about the role mixed unions could play in reproducing the dominance of
whiteness. Based on the findings from my thesis, it appears that interracial intimacy is a site of power where white dominance is reproduced. That being said, these relationships also hold the potential to be a site of contestation where racial privilege is interrogated and the effects of race in everyday life are examined and challenged. However, these relationships are not a solution for racism and racial inequality in society, even though there is a tendency to present them as such.

Based on my research, it is clear that mixed couples negotiate social meanings and racial effects in their relationships, which may provide them with opportunities to develop greater awareness of the role that race plays in structuring Canadian society. The growing number of interracial couples in Canada cannot be viewed as a sign that racism is diminishing. Instead, as many of my participants revealed, racism can be articulated in different ways. For example, white people can be made aware of their privileges through bearing witness to their partner’s experiences and developing empathetic identification with them. However, the success of this process is dependent on the emotional labour of the people of colour, who face the additional risk of their experiences of racialization being rejected by their white partners. Again, cultivating racial literacy is not the same as anti-racism, which demands action to resist the structures of racial oppression in everyday life. Deliovskey and Kitossa (2017) describe interracial intimacy as “passive means” (p. 121) not likely to bring social change, and I agree with their assessment. However, interracial intimacy remains an important site when the workings of race can be studied, as couples negotiate the meanings and effects of race on themselves and their intimate partnerships.


Canada is leading the pack in mixed unions: Why we’re setting the global standard for multicultural acceptance and integration. (2014, July 29). *Maclean’s.*


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Song, M. (2015). What Constitutes Intermarriage for Multiracial People in Britain?


Appendix A: Flyer for Recruitment

Are you an interracial couple living together for two or more years?

Would you like to share your experiences with me?

I am interested in listening to your story for my doctoral research on how mixed couples in Vancouver negotiate and narrate their identity and experience.

Please contact for more information or joining the study:
Tanvi Sirari, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, [telephone number], [email address]
## Appendix B: Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple no. (status)</th>
<th>Pseudonym (gender)</th>
<th>Status in Canada</th>
<th>Racial/ethnic background (Based on self-report)¹</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Meera (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark (M)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Chrystal (F)</td>
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<td>White Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ronald (M)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Mixed, Dutch-Indonesian</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Maxine (F)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>White American-Canadian</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rajesh (M)</td>
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<td>South Asian Indian South Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liv (F)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Mixed, French Québécois &amp; Indian Punjabi</td>
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<td>Permanent Resident</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jim (M)</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arya (M)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>8 (E)</td>
<td>Michelle (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chad (M)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>White Canadian/Caucasian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Chinese Canadian/Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ralph (M)</td>
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<td>White British/Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>(M)</td>
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<td>Citizen</td>
<td>Chinese Canadian/Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hiromi (F)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Elizabeth (F)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Otis (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May (F)</td>
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<td>Taiwanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 (M)</td>
<td>Phil (M)</td>
<td>Permanent Resident</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gina (F)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>White Canadian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 (M)</td>
<td>Sneed (M)</td>
<td>Citizen</td>
<td>White American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Mixed Thai descent, Canadian</td>
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<td>White Canadian</td>
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<td>Kris (M)</td>
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<td>Status</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Henry (M)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Abdullah (M)</td>
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</table>

1. These descriptions are based on how participants described and understood their racial and ethnic identities. Race and ethnicity are cognate concepts that are often used together, though analytically separate. Race must not be seen as a part of ethnicity because it would overlook the experience of racial minorities with racial exclusion, slavery, and colonialism (Omi & Winant, 1994). In the Canadian context, “racialised ethnicities” are often used to identify oneself (Mahtani, 2002).

2. The letter M indicates they are married; letter E indicates they are engaged to be married and have set up a date for it. A star sign * indicates that the couple has separated.

3. Blue identified herself as white although she was Turkish. She discussed how people may see her as Middle Eastern, but she believed that she was of Caucasian heritage and hence white. She saw herself as different from other Turkish people who may be identified more as Turkish because of religious practice. This poses the question of how different iterations of whiteness can be articulated in different contexts.
Appendix C: Initial letter for recruitment emailed to potential participants

Hello,

I am a PhD student at UBC in sociology. My doctoral research is on how interracial couples negotiate cultural and racial differences in their everyday life. I am inviting couples in greater Vancouver area to participate in this project to share their experiences with me. If you are a mixed couple living together for two or more years. I am interested in listening about your experiences. This consent letter attached here describes the purpose and procedure of my study, and your rights as a participant if you choose to contribute.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Attached copy of the consent letter included
Appendix D: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Interracial Intimacy: How mixed couples negotiate and narrate their identity and experience

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Renisa Mawani, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, [telephone number].

Student Researcher:
Tanvi Sirari, PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, [telephone number].

Purpose:
The primary objective of this research study is to understand how mixed couples including partners belonging to different ethno-racial backgrounds consider their experiences and sense of identity as they negotiate their cultural and racial differences in everyday life. I will be interviewing you and other couples about your experiences as a mixed couple, and your views on cultural and racial diversity in Vancouver and Canada. I also want to collect some background information that will help me place your experiences in a wider context. I will examine responses from you and others on the event and analyze them together to see how they converge and diverge from each other to draw a comprehensive picture about the experiences of mixed couples in Vancouver and Canada. The conclusions from this analysis will be a part of my doctorate thesis.

Inclusion Criteria:
I am inviting interracial mixed couples residing in the greater Vancouver area who have lived together for two or more years to participate in this project and share their experiences with me. Your insights and opinions will make an important contribution to my research.

Interview Procedures:
You are invited to participate in a research study that explores experiences of being a mixed couple in Vancouver. If you agree to take part in this interview, you will be asked to sign and date this consent form before the interview takes place; you will be given a copy of this form for your records. I will interview you twice. First interview will take place along with your partner, and the second interview will be individual. Both these interviews will take approximately 2 hours. I will ask you questions about how you see yourself as a mixed couple and negotiate your cultural and racial differences in the context of your relationship. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed into a typed document. You have the right to refuse to answer any question or to end the interview at any time.

Risks and Benefits:
There are no known risks associated with this study. However, if there are any questions you are not comfortable with, please feel free to refuse to answer them. This may provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your experiences. If you are interested in following the results of this
study, a short summary of the results can be made available to you after the conclusion of this study.

Confidentiality:
Your confidentiality will be strictly respected, and you will never be identified in the written outcomes of this research. All interview data will be stored in password-protected files on my computer. The data will also be encrypted, meaning that the data will be turned into a code to prevent unauthorized access. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym and only the investigators will have access to your identification. Please note that it may be possible that the information provided in your answers would identify you, but all efforts will be made to conceal the identity of research participants.

Contact for information about the study:
If you have any questions or want further information, you may contact Tanvi Sirari at [telephone number] or by email at [email address].

Contact for concerns about the rights of research subjects:
If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Consent:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences to you.
- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature also indicates that you have read and understand this consent form.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Name of Participant (Printed)

Signature of Participant  Date

Audio-recording consent:
I consent to the audio-recording of this interview
☐ Yes
☐ No

Would you like to be contacted with the summary of the results of this study?
☐ Yes
☐ No
Appendix E: Interview Guides

Part 1: The Couple Interview Schedule

When you hear the word mixed couple what comes to mind?
PROBE: Why do you think you thought of this?

How long have you both been together?
How did you meet?
Based on your experience what do you think is the most important for a relationship?
How do you negotiate cultural difference in your relationship?
How does racial identity affect your relationship to each other?
What does being a mixed couple mean to you?
How did your parents react to your relationship?
PROBE: Did they have specific expectations about your would-be partner?

How do you think people see mixed couples?
How do you think people react to your being a mixed couple?
PROBE: Have you ever felt that being a mixed couple have exposed you to discrimination?

What are the stereotypes associated with mixed couples that you may have encountered or that you are familiar with?
PROBE: What are the stereotypes associated with (your kind of) mixed couple?

How do you express your identity as a mixed couple?
PROBE: What sets you apart from monoracial couples?

Are there any steps you have taken to learn more about your partner’s culture, language, etc.?
How did you celebrate your wedding? If you decide to get married, how would you like to celebrate your wedding?
PROBE: How did/will you make sure both your cultures were represented?

PROBE: How do you make sure your children take from both culture? How is their racial/cultural identity affected by your status?

In what ways has being a mixed couple changed your perception about racial and cultural difference in society?
Have your ever talked to your partner about racism in Canadian society?
PROBE: Has it ever come up? In what way? Describe the experience?

What do interracial relationships indicate about Canadian society?
Has your mixed status affected the way you think about raising your children?
What do you think about Vancouver being the city with the largest number of mixed couples in Canada?
PROBE: Do you think Vancouver is more accepting of interracial intimacy than other parts of Canada?

Part B: The Individual Interview Schedule

1. If I were to ask you about your racial identity, what would you identify as and why?
2. What does being (their racial identity) mean to you?
3. What racial identity does your partner identify as?
4. Have you encountered any stereotypes associated with your racial identity?
   PROBE: Are you familiar with any stereotypes?
5. Do you believe these racial stereotypes are associated with your gender?
   PROBE: How do you think it would be if you were of a different gender?
6. Has your partner encountered any stereotypes associated with being (Their racial identity)?
   PROBE: Are you familiar with any stereotypes?
7. Do you believe these racial stereotypes are associated with their gender?
   PROBE: How do you think it would be if they were of a different gender?
8. Do you think being (Their racial identity) affects how people treat you?
9. Do you think being (Their racial identity) affected how your partner or their family/friends treat you?
10. Do you think your racial identity affects how people treat you?
11. Do you think your racial identity affects how your partners’ parents or friends treat you?
12. How do you think your racial group is treated in Canada?
   PROBE: Why do you think this is so?
13. Had your ever dated interracially before you met your partner? Please tell me more about that experience.
14. What initially attracted you towards your partner?
15. What did you think about the racial difference between both of you?
16. What did you think about the cultural differences that you might encounter?
17. When did you talk about your partner to your parents and friends? What was their initial reaction?
18. How was introducing your partner to your family and friends?
19. Was their racial identity or cultural difference ever brought up directly or indirectly in your conversations with your family and friends?
20. Did you ever feel that their racial identity affected how they were treated by your family or friends?
21. In what ways do you think being with your partner has affected your racial identity?
22. In what ways do you think being interracial can affect one’s racial identity?