Introduction

Race Mixing and Ethnoracial Boundaries

Edward’s Story

Edward had never expected to marry a white woman. A dark-skinned black man in his late twenties, Edward said that while he had dated a few white women in the past, his last long-term, serious relationship was with a black woman named Melissa. They had dated in high school back in Washington, DC, where he had grown up and also when he went away to college. When it came to looking at white women romantically, he said, “I saw white women, and to be honest with you, I didn’t even look at them in a romantic sense.” While there were some “extraordinary” white women who stood out and that Edward would notice, he largely did not think of them that way: “I never said to myself, ‘I don’t want to date a white woman,’ but I just didn’t. I was too busy looking for the next black woman, you know?”

Edward saw himself as a bit of a reformed playboy. After Melissa, he dated several women, some at the same time, often without their knowledge. If they found out about it, Edward said that he would “flat-out lie”: “So obviously, if you do those sorts of things, you’re going to piss some people off. And so, yeah, I had women call me everything, every four-letter word under the sun. . . . I’ve had a car keyed.” Looking back, Edward attributes this behavior to his immaturity at the time. These women included a few whites, with whom, he said, “there was no long-term potential.” Edward told me, “I would say this: if you had told me years ago that someday I would be married to a white woman, I would have laughed at you.”

But then Edward met Stella. They were both in graduate school and were friendly toward one another. He had always been attracted to her
smile: “I thought she was a very warm person. I thought she was a very sort of welcoming person, and I love that about her.” One night, they ended up talking for a long time and barely noticed when it started to rain.

He preferred women with Stella’s tall, slim physique, although Melissa had not been like that. Yet there was one thing that Stella and Melissa had in common. He said that he knows that he is a tough person to deal with, however: “When I met Stella, she was just, her personality just kind of matched mine.” While other women had been “really confrontational, in the sense of . . . calling you out on things,” Stella was one of the few women who did not do that. Instead, she “just recognizes my BS for what it is, and it’s just BS, and [she] can just sort of bottle it up somewhere and just say, ‘That’s just Edward.’” Edward said that Melissa, his first serious girlfriend, and Stella, his wife, are the only two women who have ever had that ability in their interactions with him.

Unfortunately, Stella’s family did not approve of her relationship with Edward. They refused to speak to her because of her decision to move with him to Los Angeles. Their reaction took a negative toll on Edward. He said, “It was the first significant time in my life where I felt sort of dehumanized.” Although Edward had not really thought about interracial relationships until he was in one, his (now) in-laws’ reaction showed him “the animosity that a lot of people have towards these sorts of relationships.”

Tatiana’s Story

I conducted an interview in Rio de Janeiro with Tatiana months after I spoke with Edward. A self-described black woman (negra), with dark-brown skin, natural hair, and in her late twenties, Tatiana’s first husband, the father of her daughter, was also black (negro). Her second husband, Gaspar, is a white man (branco). I asked Tatiana if there was a time when she decided to date only white men (brancos). She laughed and said, “Yeah, when I separated from [my first husband], me and some friends started a movement.” Laughing, she said, “We laugh, but we ourselves don’t know if the movement is serious. It’s the ‘BMANG’ movement.”

“What’s that?” I asked.
“It stands for ‘Black Men Are No Good’ [Homem Preto Não Presta].” In BMANG, Tatiana said, she and some girlfriends at work decided not only to only date whites but to prefer men who were “blond [loiro], gringo—someone really foreign!” For Tatiana, as for many Latin Americans, the term gringo refers to any foreigner, regardless of race, and does not always carry a pejorative connotation. She explained, “I went out for a while with a German guy, so I came to the store [where we worked] and said, ‘Look, a German! The movement is strong!’”

Tatiana said that the women’s bitter experiences with black men had prompted the “movement.” Her ex-husband, Alexandre, would come to the store where she worked and force her and her coworkers to wait on him and his new love interest. Her friend Rosa enjoyed a night of lovemaking with her boyfriend, followed by breakfast in bed in the morning, only to have him break up with her right afterward. Yet another contracted hepatitis from her boyfriend.

Tatiana and Gaspar had been in a band many years ago and had lost touch. They had each married and had other relationships. They ran into each other after a concert and spent the rest of the evening talking, spending the night together. They dated for a month before deciding to move in together. He was not satisfied with cohabitation, so they became official and got married (casado de papel).

However, Tatiana said that the “movement” was “a joke” and did not really determine her romantic life. She had dated a black man in the middle of the “movement”: “It was one of those things where he arrived, we fell in love, and that was the end of it,” she said. However, the other women kicked her out of BMANG until she broke up with him for reasons unrelated to race. Tatiana acknowledges that all the women in BMANG are now married to white men. While Tatiana described the “BMANG movement” as a joke, their “collective action” may have had some effect.

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Like other social boundaries,¹ ethnic and racial boundaries divide “us” from “them” and are a way of creating distinction and order in diverse social spaces. The boundaries are both internally and externally determined, with actors signaling their identification to members and nonmembers of their respective categories.² As actors define others in
a particular way, conflicts can arise when the imposition of an ethnoracial boundary negatively affects another’s social experiences. This was the case for Edward, who saw his in-laws drawing a racial boundary in terms of who their daughter should marry, leaving him feeling othered and, as he said, “dehumanized.”

Interacting in close proximity to members of another population does not in and of itself lead to a demise of ethnoracial boundaries. In fact, ethnic and racial distinctions can become heightened because of cross-boundary interactions, including interracial marriage. For some couples, ethnic and racial distinctions may be part of the foundation of their relationships. For instance, in Tatiana’s BMANG movement, she and her fellow black female coworkers pursued relationships with white men because of racial difference. Since ethnoracial boundaries and categories are both internally and externally determined, analyzing the perceptions of black-white couples shows how they negotiate them in their lives. Rather than being “love’s revolution,” interracial marriage can serve to reproduce race in unintended yet important ways. They may structure their romantic lives in terms of ethnoracial distinctions; apply ethnoracial meanings to themselves, their partners, and their children; structure their lives around its boundaries, as well as create new meanings and distinctions.

Anthropologist Fredrik Barth theorized on the nature of ethnoracial boundaries. Rather than focusing on the cultural material of different groups, such as the types of foods they eat or rituals in which they participate, Barth emphasized a “constructionist” approach that focused on the ways that people engage in the social construction and reproduction of ethnoracial boundaries. Constructionism addresses the relations between peoples and emphasizes that as social actors, they determine the markers of difference that are salient. They also decide the social norms for how to negotiate those differences. For example, in the United States, language, skin color, and eye shape are a few of the important markers of whether people are on the same or different sides of an ethnoracial boundary. Whether those same characteristics matter to the same extent in a different society like Brazil is a question that Boundaries of Love seeks to unpack.

Scholars of ethnicity and nationalism have challenged the essentialization of ethnicity and race by examining the social construction of
boundaries between religious, ethnic, and minority groups around the world. They have examined “groupness,” the sentiment that members of a social category belong together, even if there is little or no interaction among them. More than just a sense of commonality, groupness reveals how individuals understand their level of connection to other members of an ethnoracial category. It is a characteristic that varies across time and space and cannot be taken for granted in all settings, especially since people who seem to share a category can give different meanings to it and manifest their membership in different ways. Scholars like Livio Sansone and Stanley Bailey have emphasized the lack of groupness among Brazilians within color categories.

In addition, scholars of ethnicity and nationalism have examined how the state creates and counts its populations and the role of public policy on classification. They have also illuminated how and when ethnicity and race matter for relationships in spaces as diverse as social media networks and neighborhoods. There is substantial literature on the fluidity of ethnoracial boundaries in Brazil and Latin America, more broadly, which exposes how factors like class, region, and gender can influence how an individual is classified.

However, these scholars have been overwhelmingly focused on how elites interact with the state on behalf of their ethnoracial constituents. Particularly in post–Atlantic slave trade societies, they have often neglected how nonelites produce and reproduce ethnoracial and national boundaries through social interaction. This includes how everyday people make sense of belonging to ethnoracial categories, interactions with members of other categories, experiencing discrimination, de facto segregation, and family formation—all processes that largely happen away from the purview of the state.

On the other hand, race and ethnicity scholars have largely taken ethnoracial boundaries for granted. One likely reason is the rigidity of ethnoracial boundaries in the United States. Law and public policy have played a major role both historically and in the present era in fortifying ethnoracial boundaries. Both have maintained white supremacy through residential segregation and the denial of citizenship, voting, and marriage rights to prevent people from interacting as equals across ethnoracial categories. While social psychologists have conducted many studies to understand interracial contact, other social scientists
have overlooked how nonelite social actors on different sides of an ethnoracial boundary negotiate it through social interaction. As a result, much scholarship on race and ethnicity focuses on the lives of members within ethnoracial categories, rather than their interactions with those across them.

Some sociologists have shown how social actors negotiate ethnoracial boundaries in everyday life. This can include reproducing residential segregation through steering potential black homebuyers toward predominantly black neighborhoods. Ethnoracial boundary negotiation has also included less nefarious forms such as: black parents steering their children into elite black social organizations while living in predominantly white neighborhoods, students sanctioning peers when they date ethnoracial others or adopt cultural mannerisms and symbols that do not pertain to their own category, and family formation in which mothers socialize their children into their partners’ cultural practices instead of their own. However, discussion of the social construction of ethnoracial categories has largely been absent, and analyses of its boundaries have often been subtle.

When explicitly understanding the construction of ethnoracial boundaries, US scholars of race and ethnicity have focused overwhelmingly on multiracial/biracial or Latinx classifications; the social construction of “mono-racial” categories such as “black” or “white” have been underexamined. In other fields, anthropologists and ethnic-studies scholars have largely focused on the performative elements of blackness and whiteness, especially seen in controversial educational discussions of US black children “acting white.”

The ways that race and ethnicity “work” in the United States are not the same the world over. As immigrants bring different meanings attached to race and ethnicity to the United States, a growing number of scholars have shown how immigrants understand US ethnoracial categories and transmit them as “racial remittances” to people in their homelands or make sense of them upon their return. In addition, burgeoning international scholarship by sociologists has compared the meanings of race and nationality for migrants and nonmigrants across Latin America and the Caribbean. Yet how people construct ethnoracial boundaries, often assessed as fluid in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, is often not a part of their analyses.
Critical Constructionism

*Boundaries of Love: Interracial Marriage and the Meaning of Race* is novel in placing the ethnoracial boundary at the center of understanding how ethnicity and race operate for black-white couples in the United States and Brazil. However, it goes beyond aforementioned constructionist approaches by drawing on tools from critical race theory (CRT) to explicitly examine how different social categories can work with one another to produce differences in outcomes. CRT grew out of 1980s critical theory in legal scholarship and challenges essentialism by demonstrating how race is made and remade through the law. It also employs “intersectionality,” showing how social categories, such as gender and race, can mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another. This goes beyond a criminal-justice focus and is more than just a critical perspective of race and ethnicity. Critical constructionism stresses the symbolic interactionist elements of ethnoracial boundaries to unpack the meanings that nonelite social actors give to them. *Boundaries of Love* improves on typical US scholarship of race and ethnicity by revealing the intersectionality of race, gender, and education level on people’s understandings of an ethnoracial “us” versus “them.” It clarifies how, often unwittingly, people recreate ethnoracial boundaries, even as they challenge them.

I employ this critical constructionist approach through examining the boundary negotiation of people in black-white couples in two post–Atlantic slavery societies: the United States and Brazil. *Boundaries of Love* examines how people in two large, diverse, multicultural cities—Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro—understand and navigate being married to a person with membership in a different category. By adopting a critical constructionist perspective, this book does not take blackness, whiteness, or race mixture for granted. It examines the labels of “black” and “white” for the partners identified as being a black-white couple. It also assesses how nonelites make sense of being a black-white couple in terms of constructing, negotiating, bridging, redrawing, and pushing against ethnoracial boundaries. Rather than focusing on the state or the law, the family is centered as an important site for understanding the social construction of race and ethnicity.

*Boundaries of Love* compares how people in “black-white” couples negotiate ethnoracial boundaries as they (1) understand their ethnoracial
romantic trajectories, (2) classify black spouses, (3) classify white spouses, (4) classify their children, (5) become integrated into white extended families, and (6) spend time as a couple in public. This approach examines the family as a site for interpreting, representing, and explaining racial dynamics as both an antiracist and racist “racial project.”

*Boundaries of Love* reveals the meaning of race mixture between blacks and whites in discursive practice and how couples’ everyday experiences as well as the institutions around them are organized according to contemporary meanings of race mixture in their respective societies. I compare and contrast these meanings in these two societies, revealing that race mixture can reproduce white supremacy in unintended and covert ways.

This book is not about how interracial couples and their families are racist. Instead, *Boundaries of Love* shows how in societies structured by racial hierarchies and inequality, white supremacy can coexist with loving relationships across color. *Boundaries of Love* challenges the naïveté that interracial couples and their children provide an antidote to racism. Rather, it traces the contours of how marriage and the family are central institutions for reproducing race. Nevertheless, *Boundaries of Love* also reveals how these couples challenge notions of black inferiority and white superiority through everyday realities of loving and forming families across ethnoracial boundaries.

**Why (Exclusively) Black-White Couples?**

Both the United States and Brazil have large populations of people who do not neatly fit into a black-white binary. As a multiracial society, the United States has significant populations of Latinxs, Asians, indigenous peoples, and even multiracials who do not fit neatly into any one racial or ethnic category. Latinxs are the largest minority group in the United States, outnumbering the black population. While the term *Latinx* refers to people with origins in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, it includes people from a variety of national origins, ethnoracial identifications, and communities. As Brazil is the largest country in Latin America, presumably all Brazilians are Latinx. For this reason, including a US-based notion of Latinx intermarriage in this study, such as those involving “non-Hispanic” whites and Latinxs, has no Brazilian equivalent and would be problematic.
Since it was a British colony, black-white relations have been central to US ideologies of race and race mixture; black-white intermarriage has been the most heavily policed in the United States, with every single antimiscegenation law including a stipulation specifically prohibiting them. This is different from Brazil, where race mixture between blacks, whites, and indigenous peoples—whether involving marriage, concubinage, sexual liaisons, or rape—is central to national ideologies of what it means to be Brazilian. This is despite Brazil’s significant (yet regionally specific) Japanese, Jewish, and Syrian-Lebanese populations. A substantial proportion of Brazilians understand themselves as *mestiça* or mixed, yet unlike the United States, this does not preclude also having a black or white identity. Despite these differing approaches, in both societies, race relations between blacks and whites were central to ideologies of race and race mixture. *Boundaries of Love* does not purport to examine all the varieties that race mixture can take in the two societies. Nevertheless, focusing specifically on black-white intermarriage illuminates contemporary meanings of one of the most influential forms of race mixture in the two societies.

There is also an implied heteronormativity in discourses of race mixture in the two societies; namely, heterosexual relations are the engine behind race mixture. For this reason, this study focuses exclusively on heterosexual black-white couples in the two settings. However, there is a burgeoning scholarship on how same-sex interracial couples navigate race in their relationships. While these concerns are beyond the scope of *Boundaries of Love*, more studies are necessary to complicate heteronormative discourses of race mixture in the two societies and the social construction of race in everyday life more broadly.

Black-White Race Mixture in the United States and Brazil

The meanings that people attach to ethnoracial boundaries can vary with the cultural repertoires and structural resources of different societies. For this reason, it is important to understand the histories of race mixture in the United States and Brazil as well as its current meanings that circulate in these two societies. Black-white couples may draw on or challenge these meanings as they make sense of their lives, relationships, and children.
Race Mixture in the United States

For much of US history, the policing of racial boundaries was institutionalized through antimiscegenation laws. Between the 1660s and the 1960s, forty-one states or colonies enacted laws regulating sex or marriage between blacks and whites. While some laws also prohibited marriage between whites and, variously, Native Americans, Asians, and Pacific Islanders, blacks were included in every antimiscegenation law across the United States. These laws did not always embrace hypodescent or the “one-drop” rule as the definition of blackness, in which any known black ancestry renders a person black. However, those that did encouraged the notion that such a rule was enforceable.

When white settlers came to what is now the United States, interracial liaisons and marriages occurred between white indentured servants and enslaved Africans. However, the ethnoracial boundary between blacks and whites hardened by the mid-eighteenth century as the demand for slavery increased. Romantic relationships between whites and blacks violated a variety of social norms surrounding white racial dominance. For example, in 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote that blacks do not feel love, which whites were capable of, only erotic desire. Master-slave sex was popular in the social circles of the Jeffersonian Virginia elite, with “black dances” where white men would consort with black women. Jefferson’s comments are particularly ironic given his own decades-long relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. His relationship with her may have been possible for him because he saw mixed-race individuals, such as Sally Hemings, as taking on white capacities for love.

Sexuality is central to ethnoracial boundaries and has often been used to assimilate ethnoracial “others” into a dominant culture (as seen with indigenous peoples); it has also been used to reinforce power relations—for example, with whites over blacks. The use of sexuality to cross ethnoracial boundaries between whites and these “others” titillated whites with the sense that blacks and other nonwhites represented “forbidden frontiers” over which they had power. This was readily enacted in white men’s sexual abuse of black women.

Political elites reformulated British slave laws to make slaves out of the children of the sexual violation of female slaves. As a result, white
slave owners not only could satisfy their desires through the sexual abuse of their black female slaves but also received economic benefits through an increase in their slaveholdings. After the Civil War and abolition, the sexual abuse of black women continued into the Jim Crow era. In addition, illicit long-term relationships were common, again, often involving white men with black women. It was widely known that many white men, including political leaders, had black mistresses and formed second families alongside their legitimate white wives and families. This was particularly a common occurrence in the South, where ethnorracial boundaries were the most rigid and formalized through Jim Crow segregation. However, this was also a common occurrence in the North, where warding off the sexual advances of white men was common for black women and was open knowledge in black communities.

The children of these relationships continued to violate norms surrounding inheritance, threatening the wealth of white relatives. For example, the legal historian Randall Kennedy highlights several cases in which the free children of white fathers and black mothers fought white relatives for inheritance, often unsuccessfully. Unlike during slavery, these free children could petition the courts for their rights as heirs. Such interactions between blacks and whites hardened racial boundaries and maintained a sociolegal context that made interracial relationships taboo.

On the other hand, sexual relations between black men and white women, whether real or imagined, were used as an excuse to lynch black men. This practice was a form of social control that simultaneously created fear in black communities and maintained white patriarchy over white women. It continued for almost one hundred years following the Civil War and further stigmatized intermarriage. In addition, white fears surrounding black men having sex with white women dominated segregation arguments during Jim Crow.

While the North lacked Jim Crow laws, they also feared race mixture. Black-white couples were forced to live in predominantly black communities. A 1944 study by Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal found no regional difference in responses to his survey asking whites and blacks to rank the importance of different forms of integration. At the very top of whites’ list was interracial marriage and sex, with political
disenfranchisement, legal discrimination, and economic discrimination at the bottom of their list.\textsuperscript{48} For African Americans, this was reversed, with economic and legal discrimination as the most important. At the same time, warding off the sexual assault of white men, including recent Italian immigrants, was common for black women and was open knowledge in black communities.\textsuperscript{49}

The US civil rights movement led to a dismantling of de jure segregation, including the 1967 \textit{Loving v. Virginia} Supreme Court decision that invalidated state antimiscegenation laws across the country. However, recent decades have seen an increase in replacing overt bigotry with a more laissez-faire\textsuperscript{50} or color-blind\textsuperscript{51} racism in which institutional and subtle means reproduce racial inequality. It understands racial inequality as due to nonracial dynamics such as individual choice, market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and the supposed cultural limitations of nonwhites. Although overt bigotry still exists, color-blind racism is more prevalent and aids in maintaining racial boundaries between blacks and whites. This contemporary racism justifies disapproval for race-based policies targeting racial inequalities by avoiding the language of race. It also absolves most Americans from being responsible for the reproduction of race despite its socially constructed nature.

Nevertheless, over the last several decades, the United States has seen increases in interracial marriage and cohabitation: 8 percent of formal marriages (up from 4 percent in the last decade) and 14 percent of cohabiting couples are interracial.\textsuperscript{52} These increases have led some to argue that racial boundaries are declining in the United States. However, this rosy picture ignores the patterns of gendered racial exclusion among these couples. For example, Asian-white couples, one of the most common types of interracial marriage, largely involve Asian women and white men. Black-white couples disproportionately involve black men with white women. These patterns suggest that both race and gender influence the dynamics of interracial marriage. What this means for our understandings of interracial marriage is one of the questions that \textit{Boundaries of Love} will address.

Several studies have shown that interracial couples and multiracial families are not immune from dealing with race in the United States.\textsuperscript{53} In fact, they can be central to challenging social norms involving race.
For example, white women who have had children by black men played a crucial role in changing the US census to accommodate their rejection of the “one-drop rule.” While the campaign for a multiracial category on the census was not successful, their actions led to a “mark one or more” (MOOM) option for the first time on the 2000 census, with close to seven million people identifying as “more than one race” that year. In 2010, this increased by 32 percent, with nine million people identifying as more than one race. One of the most common combinations was “white and black,” with 1.8 million individuals identified as such. Nevertheless, one concession was that to prevent a decrease in “monoracials” such as black populations, multiracials would still be counted as part of their numbers.

In addition to these changes in racial identification, increased immigration from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean since the 1960s has complicated dichotomous understandings of race in the United States. Some have argued that US understandings of race increasingly resemble those common in Latin America. However, whites are less likely to marry blacks than any other major ethnic or racial minority group, suggesting a continued stigmatization rooted in the earliest antimiscegenation laws. In addition, today’s interracial marriages are less common in the South, where laws against interracial marriage were codified longer than in other parts of the country. They are also more common in the West than in the East, where race mixture was historically more stigmatized. This suggests that racial boundaries between blacks and whites remain rigid and that the legacy of antimiscegenation laws continues to this day.

*Early Race Mixing in Brazil*

In the late fifteenth century, the goal of the Portuguese was conquest and trade, rather than creating a settler society as in the United States. Unlike the United States, where entire families migrated to the New World, migrants to Brazil were largely Portuguese men, resulting in a scarcity of Portuguese women in colonial Brazil. Brazil was also the largest recipient of enslaved Africans in the New World, receiving close to thirteen times more than the United States. Far from their families
of origin (and the wives many left behind), Portuguese men often mated with indigenous and Afro-descendant women, producing Brazil’s initial racially mixed populations.

There were never US-style antimiscegenation laws in Brazil. However, during the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, the Catholic Church brought its Inquisition-era concerns over the purity of bloodlines. The church encouraged marriage between social equals, and the custom of women’s dowries and other policies were tactics to promote endogamy between whites. Most relationships between white men and women of color were unequal relations between white slave owners and the women that they owned or concubinage between poor whites and women of color. With the lack of white women, especially outside of city centers; the large populations of slaves; and growing numbers of free people of color, the crown and the church’s attempts to stigmatize interracial sexual relations and marital unions were often ineffective.

Brazil had higher rates of manumission than the United States; while they were mostly self-manumissions, blacks also organized as families and members of fraternal orders to free family members, usually women and children. Many who were freed were also the illegitimate children of slave owners; for women of color (especially the enslaved), engaging in race mixing increased possibilities of upward mobility for their offspring. This dynamic, alongside Brazil’s large mulato elite population, influenced racial ideologies of understanding intermarriage as a way to increase social status.

Race Mixing and the Nation

After abolition in 1888, elites viewed nonwhite descendants of former slaves as a hindrance to Brazilian development and evolution into a first-world nation. They cited demographic evidence of Afro-Brazilians’ lower fertility levels and higher rates of disease, malnutrition, and infant mortality to argue that they were dying out and that over several generations, whites would outnumber them. Basing their ideas on scientific racism, whites supposedly had stronger genes and would thrive. To speed up this “whitening” of the nation, the Brazilian government subsidized migration to Brazil for thousands of European immigrants while prohibiting black immigration.
Even W. E. B. Du Bois, the noted US black scholar and activist, was aware of this pervasive ideology. On his initial voyage to Brazil, he praised their race relations, holding them up as a benchmark for US treatment of blacks. However, after later experiences there, Du Bois critiqued Brazilian ideologies of race mixture in which many “have grown used to being told the settlement of the Negro problem in Brazil is merely a matter of time and absorption: that if we shut our eyes long enough, a white Brazil . . . will emerge and Africa in South America disappear.”68 Later, black activists such as Abdias do Nascimento levied a similar critique of race mixing as a form of genocide.69 This was before his own interracial marriage to US-born Elisa Larkin, a white woman and noted scholar-activist for the rights of Afro-Brazilians. This perspective of interracial relations forming a part of black genocide, while extreme, still exists on the margins of black communities.

In the 1930s, Gilberto Freyre, a Brazilian sociologist and public intellectual, popularized the concept of Brazil as a nation with harmonious race relations, integration, and large amounts of interracial mating.70 Unlike his peers, Freyre valued the African cultural heritage of Brazil and saw race mixture as the foundation of Brazilian culture. In his seminal works *Masters and the Slaves* and *The Mansions and the Shanties*,71 Freyre praised the large amount of interracial mating that occurred among Brazilians, interpreting it as evidence of a lack of conflict in race relations, especially compared with the United States. In fact, with nostalgic longing, he referenced his own sexual relations with *mulata* domestics who worked for him and his family, ignoring its suggestions of sexual coercion and rape.

Although he never used the term himself,72 the concept of Brazil as a “racial democracy” has often been attributed to Freyre. While it is unclear whether he referred to sexual liaisons, concubinage, or formal marriage,73 the ideology of “racial democracy” influenced future race scholars of Brazil and became part of the Brazilian national creed. For example, a Brazilian “mulatto escape hatch” supposedly allowed individuals of racially mixed ancestry to enjoy freedom from the stigma of blackness and engage in upward mobility.74

Whereas the United States used segregation to assuage whites’ fears of race mixture with blacks, in Brazil and other Latin American countries, race mixture was viewed as evidence of the social inclusion of
blacks and indigenous peoples. In this “racial democracy,” racial boundaries did not exist not because everyone was white, as in whitening ideology, but because color was supposedly not an impediment to interpersonal relations, and racism was not a feature of Brazilian society.

Yet racial democracy still encouraged race mixture as an ideal. In the 1950s, a study of “elites of color” showed that people gained prestige through marrying whites and had the expectation that their children would have a whiter appearance. A different study found that whitening was “a ‘universal’ aspiration” of all nonwhites as well as a way of increasing social status. No longer solely an elite ideology, whitening was a strategy that nonwhites used to move up the status and racial hierarchy. This ideology is exemplified today by the popular adage that “money whitens.” As this idea suggests, racial boundaries have not disappeared; instead, nonwhites have purposefully negotiated them to receive the benefits associated with whiteness and to approximate whiteness over generations.

For decades, elites used the ideology of Brazil as a racial democracy to obscure racial inequality as well as prevent black and indigenous mobilization. However, the end of the twentieth century ushered in an increased prominence of black consciousness-raising. Black movement activists mobilized, though unsuccessfully, for a black (negro) category on the Brazilian census. In 2000, over forty thousand people participated in a historic march in Brasilia emphasizing the continuing existence of racial inequality. Activists attended the 2001 UN World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, publicly challenging the notion of Brazil as a racial democracy. Since then, over fifty state and federal universities have created racial quotas for the poor and for Afro-Brazilian students. Former president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (“Lula”) created the Ministry for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SEPPIR) in 2003. More Brazilians have embraced a negro racial identity and are using the color terms brown (pardo) or black (preto) on the census to identify themselves. In addition, mounting scholarly evidence of racial disparities has problematized the notion of Brazil being a racial democracy.

Despite the mythologizing of race mixture in Brazil, actual romantic relationships involving blacks and whites are still taboo, with white Brazilians still stigmatizing marriage with blacks. In addition, race
mixing is not as common as often thought; although nonwhites are the majority of Brazil, cohabitation and formal marital unions across racial categories compose only 30 percent of all marriages. 85 This is low given Brazilian ideologies of racial democracy suggesting interracial marriage is widely prevalent. In addition, demographers have argued that marriages between whites and nonwhites are often characterized by status exchange in which nonwhite spouses make up for their lower racial status by having higher levels of education than their white partners. 86 Thus ethnoracial boundaries still appear to be a factor in interpersonal relations, including marriage and family formation.

Methodology

Boundaries of Love is part of the move to use social scientific and empirical methods in critical race theory. 87 It is based on 103 qualitative interviews that I conducted between 2008 and 2012 in Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro. These include ninety-three individual qualitative interviews with each member of forty-seven black-white couples as well as ten preliminary couple interviews (see tables I.1 and I.2). (For one of the Brazilian couples, I was only able to interview the wife, a black woman.) Fifty-five individual interviews took place in Rio de Janeiro and thirty-eight in Los Angeles. In all, I interviewed twenty-seven couples in Rio de Janeiro and nineteen couples in Los Angeles. Respondents ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-five (see appendices A and B). Rather than testing a hypothesis, I “take talk seriously” 88 by analyzing these qualitative interviews to understand how black-white couples construct meaning in their social lives and what this means for how race is lived in the two societies. As Jessie Bernard famously articulated, in every (heterosexual) marriage, there are two relationships: “his” and “hers.” 89 To capture this difference in perspectives, I interviewed all the spouses separately. This also prevented one partner from dominating or steering the interview. Since I am fluent in Portuguese, I conducted all the interviews in Rio de Janeiro myself.
As important urban areas, with large populations of blacks and whites, both cities represent their respective countries in the international mindscape: Los Angeles through its Hollywood industry and Rio de Janeiro with its yearly Carnaval and, more recently, hosting both the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. In both Brazil and the United States, interracial couples tend to congregate in urban areas, making these sites amenable to finding black-white couples. In addition, after controlling for racial composition, Los Angeles has the highest rates of black out-marriage of any major US city. Nevertheless, it is also the site of many black uprisings, whether in Watts in 1965 or after the 1992 acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. While neither city is representative of their respective societies, they provide important insight into the variations in experiences of black-white couples in the two countries.

**Research Sites**

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**Recruitment and Dilemmas of Racial Identification**

Since race is a social construct, what constitutes a black-white couple can differ in the two societies. In the United States, whiteness is understood as more exclusive and is based on perceived (albeit not actual) “racial purity” in one’s ancestry. Race in Brazil has historically been

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**Table 1.1. Individual Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rio de Janeiro</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black men with white women</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black women with white men</td>
<td>21*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For one of the Brazilian couples, I was only able to interview the wife, a black woman.

**Table 1.2. Couple Interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rio de Janeiro</th>
<th>Los Angeles</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black men with white women</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black women with white men</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
characterized by a color continuum with more fluid categories. In Brazil, whiteness does not prohibit acknowledging black ancestry because blackness is determined more by phenotype than strictly ancestry. In addition, similar to many nations in Latin America, Brazil understands itself to be a nation where everyone is reputedly of mixed-race ancestry. Due to these differences in classification, people in my sample who are black by US standards might not be considered black in Brazil.

Although Brazil is characterized by a continuum, the census categorizes residents into one of five color categories: white (branca), brown (parda), black (preta), indigenous (indígena), and yellow/Asian (amarela). The term parda literally refers to a grayish-brown color that is rarely used in common parlance and is mostly an official categorization. The indigenous and Asian categories together make up about 2 percent of the population. The Brazilian government and the black social movement often collapse the preta and parda categories into one encompassing black (negra) category. In Portuguese, preta refers to the color of an item, such as black shoes (sapatos pretos), while negra is about having dark skin as well as having primarily African ancestry. Increasingly, negra is becoming a term used by Afro-descendants outside of the Brazilian black movement.

I asked a variety of native Brazilians—including friends, professors, street vendors, and housekeepers—if they knew any couples involving “a black person married to a white person,” using that exact phrase (negro casado com branco). Using this phrase, Brazilian informants often mentioned the couples that they knew involving black men with white women in Rio de Janeiro. To be inclusive of both types of pairings, I was careful to use specific gendered terms when asking for contacts, saying I was looking for a black man married to a white woman (negro casado com branca) or a black woman married to a white man (negra casada com branco).

This tactic initially prioritized the perspective of Brazilian outsiders in identifying black-white couples over individuals’ self-identification. Yet to reflect how Brazil operates on a color continuum, I also interviewed spouses who self-identified using intermediate terms like mixed (mestiça) or brown (moreno, parda) despite being classified as black or white by the Brazilian informant. Within these parameters, only three Brazilian respondents self-identified differently from outsiders. This is
similar to Brazilian nationally representative studies showing that self-identification overwhelmingly corresponds to outsider racial identification.97 None of the couples overlapped in racial identification. I explain black and white identities among Brazilian respondents in greater depth in chapters 2 and 3.

In Los Angeles, I relied on referrals from friends and colleagues and scouted for couples in public spaces, including grocery stores and shopping malls, using my outsider identification as an aspect of sample selection. I found that white friends and colleagues were more likely than friends and colleagues of color to refer couples in which the nonwhite member identified as multiracial. This dynamic revealed the tenacity of the one-drop rule, especially for white Americans.98 However, unlike Brazil, the majority of US blacks and whites do not see themselves as multiracial, despite actual different-race ancestry. For this reason, in Los Angeles, I excluded people who self-identified as biracial or multiracial from this analysis.

In both sites, I also used snowball sampling, a technique ideal for finding hard-to-reach individuals.99 Since black-white couples are the minority of married couples in both countries, this technique was useful for finding black-white couples. Using this technique, I asked the couples that I interviewed for referrals of other black-white couples. There was never a snowball of respondents; couples that I interviewed usually knew one other couple. I frequently resorted back to searching for couples through my personal contacts and, in Los Angeles, public spaces. Still, I found more potential interviewees using this method than if I had not done so.

Again, these combinations do not reflect the plethora of intermarrying possibilities in the Brazilian context. Nevertheless, this selection process allowed me to stay true to local understandings of race and color. It also provided more homogeneity in how outsiders identify and treat black-white couples in both sites.

Sampling by Race-Gender Combinations and Education

To capture variation by race-gender combination and education, I also used purposive sampling techniques. Overall, twenty couples involved a black woman with a white man, and twenty-seven couples involved a
black man with a white woman (see appendices A and B). To stay true to the status exchange prevalent in Brazilian intermarriage, I sampled for couples involving three different educational-attainment groupings when they married: neither partner having college experience, one partner having college experience, and both spouses having some college experience. There is substantial diversity in the educational statuses of these black-white couples, including those involving status exchange (see appendix table 1). In the United States, interracial marriages are concentrated among college-educated populations. This likely reflects college as an important site for students to encounter people from backgrounds for the first time. It is also likely related to the overall US growth in educational assortative mating over the last several decades, in which spouses increasingly have the same educational level. As a consequence, almost the entire Los Angeles sample has at least some college experience (appendix table 2). Throughout the book, I discuss the implications of race-gender combinations and education levels on the meanings that these couples give to negotiating ethnoracial boundaries.

Casado, Cohabitation, and Marriage

Brazilians and people in the United States have different understandings of what it means for couples to live together outside of formal marriage. “Stable unions” (uniões estaveis) have always been common in Brazil, where these cohabiting relationships were only recently formalized by the state. Today, stable unions make up close to a third of all marital unions in Brazil and are often long-term, with levels of commitment similar to formal marriage. The 1988 Brazilian constitution recognized stable unions as families, with inheritance and community property rights similar to those of formal marriage. Brazilians in stable unions often use the term for married (casada or casado) to describe their status, implying that they share a home, or casa, regardless of being officially married (casado de papel).

In the United States, cohabitation is a recent phenomenon; most people who cohabit move into a formal marriage state or separate within a few years. Marriage remains more common among upper-middle-class people, like my Los Angeles respondents, than long-term
cohabitation. However, there is variation by race; cohabitation is often a precursor to marriage for whites but is more of an alternative to marriage for blacks and Latinxs.\textsuperscript{105} For these reasons, the meaning of cohabitation is unclear for interracial couples in the United States.

In consideration of these issues, I interviewed people in both cohabiting and formally married unions in both societies. My only requisite was that the couples saw themselves as being in a marriage-like union. This decision allowed for greater comparability between the two research sites.

**Black Woman in the Field**

Conducting research on black-white couples as a black woman meant that there were two stereotypes that I had to navigate. First, many respondents assumed that I was in an interracial relationship. I was not. It was only when I met them in person to conduct the interviews that a few respondents, having seen my (Igbo) last name, asked about my Japanese husband. This assumption meant that a few interracial couples likely saw a camaraderie with me, making them more open to participating.

On the other side of the spectrum was the “angry black woman” stereotype that all black women are against interracial marriage, especially those involving black men with white women.\textsuperscript{106} To combat this stereotype, I purposefully smiled even more than I normally do to cultivate a nonthreatening, cheery persona that would make couples comfortable. In addition, I started interviews by asking respondents about their childhoods, their experiences in school, and their neighborhoods when they were growing up. This enabled me to build a rapport before asking difficult questions. I discuss these dynamics further in appendix B.

**Overview of the Book**

In chapter 1, I discuss the “romantic career,” the ways that people draw on prior romantic and dating experiences to understand their ethnorracial preferences or (lack thereof) for romantic partnership and marriage. This chapter reveals how preferences for “big black men,” or negão, are
very explicit in Rio de Janeiro. This is different from Los Angeles, where there is a great deal of silence surrounding ethnoracial preferences despite life histories that suggest them. Overall, I illustrate the ways that partners construct boundaries and hierarchies of preference based on ethnoracial characteristics.

Chapter 2 shows how black spouses in Los Angeles and Rio de Janeiro understand their position within the boundaries of black racial categorization. I analyze how and why they consider themselves black and examine ethnoracial congruency between this and their white partners’ assessment of their blackness. Contrary to many scholars of Brazil, I find that black spouses have a sense of groupness\textsuperscript{107} in which they understand blacks as part of their “imagined community”;\textsuperscript{108} this, along with ancestry, physical appearance, and official documentation, make up their black identity. In Los Angeles, black respondents articulated a stronger sense of groupness and perceived history and resistance to oppression as elements tying them to other blacks. However, they saw class distinctions, immigrant ancestry, and less fluency in black culture as putting them on the margins of blackness. White husbands and wives understood their black husbands and wives as existing at the margins of blackness in both sites yet did not recognize the importance of groupness. I find more ethnoracial congruency between black-white couples in Los Angeles than in Rio de Janeiro.

Chapter 3 examines how white spouses understand their whiteness as well as congruency with their black partners. In both sites, there were whites who identified with blackness, but this was more prevalent among white Carioca (people from Rio de Janeiro) wives. In Rio de Janeiro, white spouses redrew, pushed against, and bridged over ethnoracial boundaries. In Los Angeles, whites had less flexibility in navigating ethnoracial boundaries yet bridged over class differences within whiteness. They also changed the meaning of the boundary by converting it from a racial one to one full of many “ethnic options.”\textsuperscript{109} Black partners in both places largely considered their white spouses unquestionably white. Overall, ethnoracial boundaries were more flexible and permeable for white spouses than black spouses in both societies.

Chapter 4 compares the ways that parents in the sample racially identify their children in these two societies. I find that Carioca parents often expected their child to be black, yet once they were born, the child’s
phenotype dictated how the parents categorized them, whether white, black, or a middle category. No one used the term *mulato/a* to refer to their child, despite its prevalence in popular and historical discourse. I found that black was the most common category that Carioca parents used to identify their children; it was also the category with the greatest congruence between parents. In Los Angeles, parents identify their child as “biracial,” complicating the one-drop rule. This term also had a great deal of congruence. This chapter demonstrates the involvement of parents in the construction of new racial boundaries as well as the strengthening of preexisting ones due to new forms of racial categorization. This chapter also discusses the implications of these categorization processes for affirmative action policy in both sites. It shows how white parents understand the material benefits of affirmative action for their offspring and adjust understandings of racial categorization accordingly.

Chapter 5 compares how black spouses in both sites negotiate and challenge racial boundaries as they marry into white extended families. I find that white Brazilian families express overt displeasure about their white daughters dating black men. In what I call the irony of opposition, a history of race mixture in white Brazilian families is not correlated with black acceptance. In the United States, couples describe their family members as expressing disapproval of relationships with black men. These findings are counterintuitive given the long-standing narrative that unlike in the United States, Brazilians do not practice overt interpersonal racism. I also find that higher rates of domestic migration among US couples result in less integration of black spouses into white families than among Brazilian couples, whose tight-knit family relationships lead to more incorporation of black spouses. The experiences of black spouses as they integrate into their white partners’ families demonstrate the continuing salience of white supremacy and antiblackness despite intermarriage.

In chapter 6, I discuss the ways that interracial couples negotiate racial boundaries in public spaces. I show the different tactics of avoidance that they employ to navigate outsiders’ potential stigmatization, including avoiding predominantly black settings in the United States and predominantly white, wealthy ones in Brazil. I also describe their experiences of stigma, which includes what I term *racial boundary-policing* to refer to the ways outsiders react to people who challenge
racial boundaries. While other scholars have discussed “policing the color line,” I use the critical constructionist approach to place ethnoracial boundaries—understandings of “us” versus “them”—at the center of analysis. This illustrates how social actors—whether in interracial marriages or outsiders who harass them—reproduce these boundaries through their social interactions.

I find that black women in Rio de Janeiro describe being treated as prostitutes when with their white husbands in wealthy, white, touristy areas of Rio. In the United States, white women describe hostility from black women in public in incidents that their husbands describe with less animosity. This chapter shows how couples perceive and reconstruct racial boundaries in their understandings of interactions with outsiders.

Within each chapter, I deviate from the writings of many comparative sociologists by having separate sections on Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles. I do this for ease of reading as well as to highlight important distinctions in the two sites. Nevertheless, each section within the chapters includes comparisons with the other site as a reminder of both the similarities and the differences.

I conclude with a discussion of how racial hierarchies privileging whiteness remain unchallenged by bonds of love across racial boundaries in both Brazil and the United States. Specifically, white spouses in both places experience more flexibility and porosity in racial boundaries than their black spouses. I discuss how, similar to racial integration in other institutions, such as schools and housing, multiracial families do not automatically eliminate racial boundaries. Instead of assuming that interracial marriage fosters the creation of a racial paradise, interracial couples reveal how ethnoracial boundaries and white supremacy continue to exist in family life. They also demonstrate that love is no substitute for public policy or social movements addressing racial inequality.

A Book of Firsts

There is a long tradition of cultural exchange in which US scholars like E. Franklin Frazier and W. E. B. Du Bois went to Brazil and initially praised the easy relations between blacks and whites. Similarly, Brazilian scholars such as Gilberto Freyre spent significant amounts of time studying and traveling in the United States, bemoaning the lack
of integration in a society plagued by Jim Crow, both formal (in the South) and informal (in the North and West). These scholars often made comparisons between the two societies that relied on their impressions, not on systematic evidence.

Recently, comparative approaches abound on understanding race in the two societies that are indeed based on evidence. These have included comparative historical approaches to the role of race in state formation and policy as well as large-scale quantitative studies providing nationally representative comparisons of racial categorization, segregation, intermarriage, and racial attitudes in the two countries. Qualitative scholars have examined the effect of migration to the United States on how Brazilians understand race both while abroad and when they return home. The most ambitious qualitative study to date has compared how members of marginalized ethnoracial populations, including Afro-Brazilians, negotiate their stigmatization in the United States, Brazil, and Israel.

However, *Boundaries of Love* offers one of the first systematic comparisons of how nonelite Americans and Brazilians, both black and white, make sense of and give meaning to race and ethnicity in their lives. Through using a critical constructionist perspective, this book uncovers the implications of Brazil’s flexible versus the US’s rigid boundaries in the lives of people who take them for granted. At the same time, it reveals how people negotiate those boundaries, whether by employing cultural repertoires that reproduce, push against, bridge over, blur, or dismantle them. Furthermore, this is the first comparative study to take an intersectional approach to comparing race across different societies. As a book of many firsts, hopefully *Boundaries of Love* offers a new way of understanding race for scholars and nonscholars alike.

There have been many qualitative studies examining the lives of interracial couples in the United States across a variety of ethnoracial categories, including blacks, whites, Latinxs, and Asians. This has also been true in Brazil, although to a lesser extent. *Boundaries of Love* is one of the first studies to compare the experiences of interracial couples across societies. It is unique in drawing on the experiences of interracial couples to not just understand these relationships but provide a microcosm of societal dynamics, looking at the meanings of interactions between members of both stigmatized and dominant groups across
ethnoracial boundaries. *Boundaries of Love* is also the first book to interrogate how both race and gender as well as other social categories can combine to produce particular meanings of race mixing.

*Boundaries of Love* is not a love story. Those seeking a romance novel should look elsewhere. Instead, I ask the reader to suspend ideas that “love conquers all” as they engage the next several pages.

Onward and upward!