Becoming Black Women: Intimate Stories and Intersectional Identities

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that intimate stories are an important resource for the achievement of intersectional identities. Drawing on in-depth interviews with black college students at two predominantly white universities, I examine the stories black college women tell about interracial relationships between black men and white women. I argue that interracial stories serve an array of social purposes that go well beyond black women's intimate lives themselves. Interracial stories draw on public beliefs about gender, sexuality, and race to create a collective identity, imbue it with meaning, and socialize black women into common dispositions and practices. The transition to college makes race newly salient to black women; black women must coordinate raced gender identities with other black women across differences in backgrounds and dispositions. By learning and adopting interracial stories, black college women create alliances with other black women, draw boundaries against black men and white women, and craft black womanhood as strong and outspoken. Women's identity work is constrained, however, by the contradictions within and among gender, race, and class meanings, which make it difficult for them to enact identities that are at once strong and respectable, pushing black women to tie interracial stories to sexual restraint. I conclude by examining the implications of interracial stories for understanding black women's identities and the processes of intersectionality more broadly.

Keywords

race, gender, class, sexuality, social identity, intersectionality, qualitative methods, stories

The intersectional paradigm holds that race, class, and gender cannot be understood as discrete categories of analysis but are instead mutually constituted (McCall 2005; Shields 2008). Identities are organized at the complex intersection of multiple categories of membership and meaning. Intersectional scholarship, however, has primarily been concerned with mapping distinct identity constellations (Shields 2008). This approach unseats "totalizing fictions" (Somers 1994) that assume homogeneity within social categories, but it is static and does not explicate the social psychological implications of intersectionality itself for how people experience, negotiate, or enact identities (Choo and Ferree 2010; Shields 2008). Moreover, intersectional

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scholarship has not yet examined the ways in which category intersections may themselves create identity dilemmas.

In this article, I focus on one process through which intersectional identities are achieved and managed: storytelling. Scholars have examined the role of the stories people tell each other (and themselves) in a range of contexts, including social movements, organizations, policy making, and research interviews (Fields 2005; Irvine 2004; Plummer 1995; Polletta 2006; Presser 2004; Tilly 2002). This work has emphasized stories as tools for both self-making and sense-making and has more recently examined the social distribution of stories, focusing on institutional constraints (Polletta 2006). I propose that these features of stories make them useful cultural tools for crafting intersectional identities and for negotiating key dilemmas entailed in intersectional identity work.

I use interview data with black students at two predominantly white universities to examine the use of stories to construct and negotiate intersectional identities. Here, I focus only on one set of stories: black college women's stories about interracial relationships between black men and white women. In these stories, black college women claim that they are angry because black men "only" have relationships with white women. Other research also documents black women's objection to relationships between black men and white women. Feminist scholars argue that black women's anger responds to their gender and racial disadvantages in heterosexual markets (Childs 2005; Collins 2004). I take a different vantage. By viewing women's stories as both cultural products and culturally productive, rather than windows on women's intimate experiences, I treat them as a case of storytelling and intersectional identity work. Anger, Audre Lorde (1984) writes,

is a generative force for black women; here, I show how women's stories—and the anger these stories generate—produce gendered racial identities in the context of college.

Interracial stories take as their subject both *whom* and *how* people engage in intimate practices, but an exclusive focus on the sexual content of these stories conceals their broader uses. Sexuality is central to race, class, and gender meanings. Ideas about how and with whom people are and should be intimate confer citizenship, status, and resources on different groups of people and justify inequalities among them (Donovan 2003; Elliott 2010; Fields 2005; Wilkins 2004). In telling interracial stories, black college women use cultural ideas about raced and gendered sexuality to create and coordinate gendered and classed racial identities. Their efforts are constrained, however, by both the dynamic of storytelling itself and the contradictions within and between race, class, and gender meanings.

RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Academics widely view race, class, and gender as social constructs, created and performed at both the macro and the micro levels. Historically, race, class, and gender categories have been imposed on people as a means of justifying unequal social arrangements (Collins 2004). At the same time, people actively claim and manipulate race, class, and gender meanings through everyday, repetitive interactions (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Identities thus emerge from negotiations between imposed and chosen meanings.

"Controlling images" inflict narrow cultural images on black women. Depicted as matriarchs, mammies, welfare mothers, and jezebels, controlling images portray black women as sexually other: either uncontrollably sexual or abnormally

asexual and emasculating. These images provide ideological justification for persistent racial oppression by masking the structural arrangements that maintain racial inequality, pinning responsibility instead on black women's "failed" gender performances (Collins 1991, 2004). Controlling images impose external expectations on behavior and create internal expectations people use to evaluate their own performances. Insiders and outsiders employ these images in interaction (Mead 1934) to make sense of intersectional identity performances and to interpret behavior. In this sense, controlling images are imposed and limiting. But African Americans may also collude with controlling images, participating in them to gain security, wealth, authenticity, or visibility or because the images contain the possibility of resistance or fun (Collins 2004). Collins (1991:93) argues, "African-American women encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas that should provide meaning in our daily lives." But while she uses literary sources to illustrate these complexities, less is known about how black women grapple with controlling images in their daily lives, using them to make sense of their own experiences and identities.

Moreover, the intersections of gender, race, and class more generally, and controlling images of black women specifically, contain cultural contradictions that create difficult, if not untenable, social positions (Collins 1991, 2004). When black women resist one controlling image, they activate another; for example, black women who do not act like mammies are seen as jezebels. Controlling images work together in such a way to make it impossible for black women to occupy an "ordinary," namely, unmarked, social position. Thus, intersectionality does not just imply a unique identity constellation but can require social actors to achieve coherent

identities in the face of incoherent identity expectations. Important questions remain about how people create and manage intersectional identities in everyday life and about the role of imposed cultural images in these processes.

STORIES IN THE CREATION OF IDENTITIES

I propose that an examination of stories can help address these questions. As a means of "giving voice" to marginalized groups, feminist scholars have often treated narratives as an antidote to the invisibility and silencing that accompany race, class, and gender domination. For example, Tricia Rose (2003:9) writes that black women's stories about intimacy "are vital in helping black people rewrite widely held dehumanizing ideas about black people" and in exposing the ways racism, sexism, and classism structure black women's experiences of intimacy. In this perspective, narratives are more or less "real" windows on people's experiences. I take a different view of stories here. Stories themselves are both social products and socially productive (Polletta 2006). Because stories are means by which cultural meanings are accessed, reproduced, and challenged, they are important resources for intersectional identity work.

Identity work refers to the ways people use signifiers to claim and give meaning to their selves (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Because we use stories to create self-representations, they are an important resource in identity work. Although people engage in "fictive storytelling"— spinning lies about themselves to manage impressions (Snow and Anderson 1987)— most stories we tell are sincere—that is, we believe that the story we are telling is true. We often view sincere stories as revealing of people's "real" identities. But these stories are also performances that

work to *create* identities (Somers 1994). We do not tell only one story but adapt the stories we tell for different audiences and to accommodate local contingencies (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Stories— both about ourselves and about others— align people with groups, create boundaries between groups, and give meaning to group membership. For example, women with partial white heritage tell stories about oppressive whites to claim nonwhite racial belonging. These stories distance them from their white heritage and align them with people of color (Storrs 1999). By adopting group stories, people become authentic group members: participants in Alcoholics Anonymous become "alcoholics" by learning and then telling the AA story (Cain 1991). The processes of learning and telling stories help people fit their biographies to those stories. Such storytelling, in turn, transforms participants' emotions and experiences, facilitating a collective identity by creating a common set of dispositions and interpretations (Mason-Schrock 1996; Wilkins 2008a). Thus, the stories we tell shape both how we appear to others and how we think about who we are.

The identity work literature has tended to focus on people's agency in telling stories, but storytelling is not unfettered. Stories draw on local contingencies (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) and are constrained by institutional expectations. Institutions require people to fit their stories into an existing framework, disallowing other kinds of stories. Dunn (2002) found that women are only able to gain legal assistance against their stalkers if they are able to present themselves as victims. Premised on helplessness, the victim story precludes them from telling alternative stories about fighting back. Thus, telling and privileging certain stories limits the range of available interpretations, positions, or experiences. In addition, some narrators and some story forms

have more authenticity than others. Storytellers who have other kinds of social power are more likely to have their stories treated as "authentic" and important, while storytellers with less social power are more likely to have their stories questioned, trivialized, or dismissed as "just" a story (Polletta 2006). By foreclosing some interpretations and compelling others and by granting some narrators more authenticity than others, these processes delimit cultural meaning and allocate social rewards in ways that often favor cultural stakeholders.

But stories can also be a source of change. New stories produce new institutional and cultural responses, forcing institutions to adapt to stories, rather than the other way around. Although neither rape nor child abuse were new experiences, they became legitimate grounds for remediation and sympathy, and generated institutional responses, after they became acceptable cultural stories (Plummer 1995). Stories can create collective identities and mobilize political movements and can be a resource used to enact political change (Irvine 2004; Polletta 2006; Tilly 2002). In the absence of other material resources, stories provide cultural resources.

Thus, stories are conservative and transformative, institutionalized and adaptive. They are a means of creating individual, authentic-feeling selves and a way of connecting to a collectivity. In this way, stories bridge culture and institutional arrangements (Somers 1994). An investigation of stories has the potential to reconcile tensions between imposed and chosen identities.

In this article, I focus on the use of stories in everyday life to navigate and give meaning to intersectional identities that are both chosen and imposed; to suture gender, class, and race together; and to make that identity feel real. I examine the ways in which people use stories to

do identity work, the constraints on their efforts, and the consequences of these dynamics. Here, I am concerned with intimate stories. Intimate stories are related to sexual practices and desires but are not the same thing. I use the term *intimate*, instead of *sexual*, to convey the broad range of emotions and concerns embedded in these stories—concerns that go well beyond sexual practices themselves. Indeed, intimate stories may have little to do with what people actually do. The notion that sexual stories are deeply individual and revelatory of one's real desires lends them credibility but masks their other uses; like other kinds of stories, intimate stories are socially organized and serve social purposes (Plummer 1995). People use intimate stories to create or exploit ideas about people's intimate practices in order to achieve other social ends.

I argue that interracial stories are a form of storytelling used by participants to not only make sense of and navigate their intimate lives, but to negotiate race, class, and gender identities. Interracial stories create a collective identity, imbue it with meaning, and socialize black women into common dispositions and practices. Intimate stories enact, manage, and make meaningful black women's identities by drawing on, transforming, and colluding with existing cultural ideas about gender and classed race. The stories black college women tell about interracial relationships are not just about intimacy, but are a cultural vehicle through which they imagine and manipulate tensions between individuality and collective notions of authenticity, and through which they craft, communicate, and enact solutions to the everyday identity dilemmas they encounter in the context of the university.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

This study is part of a larger project aimed at investigating the lives of black-identified students. The study includes 43 in-depth, open-ended, life history interviews with black- or African American–identified undergraduate students. This article focuses on the 25 women. As I discuss more in the following, white women—the author and a research assistant—conducted the interviews. Participants attended one of two large, predominantly white public universities that I call Midwestern (8) and Western (17). Midwestern's population of black students (5.4 percent) is more substantial than Western's (1.4 percent). The schools are in different regions: a Midwestern state in which blacks are the most visible minority group at 11.6 percent of the population and an interior Western state in which Mexicans are the most visible minority group, with blacks comprising 4 percent of the population.

I used a range of recruitment strategies to identify students who occupied different university social spaces and diverse social networks. I used initial interviews and informal conversations to map the terrain of black students and combined multiple snowball samples with targeted recruiting. The sample here contains members of black organizations and their discontents, athletes and non-athletes, engineering and social science majors, Greeks, non-Greeks, and members of predominantly white fraternities or sororities. Most participants identified themselves as "middle class," but descriptive details of their families and neighborhoods indicated a broader range of economic backgrounds. I indicate class, using parental occupation and residential community, in Table 1. Participants came from suburban, urban, and rural backgrounds and from two-parent, single parent, and step-parent homes. Most participants grew up in predominantly white communities and/or attended predominantly white schools prior to university. All had at least one working parent, and none came from

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participants	Social class	Racial identity	University	Year in college
Aisha*	Middle	Black	Western	First
Anna*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Ashley*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Brandi*	Working	Black	Midwestern	Junior
Brenda*	Working	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Charis	Working	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Desta*	Middle	Black	Western	Senior
Ella	Upper middle	Biracial	Western	Senior
Grace*	Upper middle	Black	Western	Senior
Janae*	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Kayla*	Upper middle	Biracial	Western	Senior
Kendra*	Poor to middle	Black	Western	Junior
Kiara	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Lauren*	Working	Black	Western	Sophomore
Madison*	Working	Biracial	Western	Junior
Mei*	Middle	Black	Western	Junior
Mina*	Middle	Black	Western	Sophomore
Naomi	Middle	Biracial	Western	Recent graduate
Nikki	Middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Renee	Middle	Black	Midwestern	Junior
Samantha*	Elite	Biracial	Western	Senior
Sasha*	Upper middle	Black	Midwestern	Senior
Stephanie*	Upper middle	Black	Western	Junior
Tiffany*	Working	Black	Western	Sophomore
Yemisi*	Working	Black	Western	Senior

*Quoted in article.

homes that received public assistance. Most, but not all, had attended public high schools, but some had gone to private high schools. Participants were of traditional college age (18–22); one woman was in her midtwenties.

I conducted all but three of the one- to three-hour interviews, and oversaw the other three that were conducted by a research assistant. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The initial research questions were broad: How do black students experience the transition to college? How do racial identities change in college? How does gender affect these processes? To assess these questions, interviews covered a set of open-ended topics, including schooling, friendship, and dating both before and after the transition to college, but were largely unstructured conversations, accommodating emerging themes and participants' concerns. We sometimes probed for issues of race but often did not, as it was already central to how participants organized their accounts. We asked broad questions like, "Tell me about your experiences in high school"; "Why did you choose [college]?"; "What was the transition to [college] like for you?"; and "Who are your friends?" In most interviews, we did not ask specifically about interracial relationships. Instead, participants introduced the topic themselves, bringing up interracial relationships when discussing their interactions with other black students at the university, their dating experiences, experiences with campus organizations, and their ideas about what it means to be a black university man or woman.

The women in this study told us stories about interracial relationships to explain their experiences as black college women—both to us and to themselves—and to create impressions about what it means to be a black woman.

Debates about insider/outsider positioning in qualitative research focus on two concerns: the racial outsider's ability to develop rapport with an interview subject and her ability to understand racial dynamics she has not experienced herself. Central to both concerns are questions about whether a racial outsider can access the "real" story (Winddance Twine 2000). In many cases, black students and faculty aided us in recruitment, vouching for our trustworthiness as anti-racial allies. In addition, the research assistant and I aimed to increase rapport by establishing common ground through small talk, explaining our interest in learning about racial dynamics from participants' vantage, and starting with broad questions that let participants set the interview pace and tone. The richness and the forthrightness of the interviews reassured us that we had successfully created a comfortable interview climate; indeed, as the comments reveal, participants did not hesitate to express negative views of white women involved with black men (as well as white women who were not involved with black men, although such comments are largely outside the purview of this article).

Our intent, moreover, was never to seek participants' "real" stories. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) argue that we should treat the interview not as an opportunity to hear the "truth" of speakers' lives, but as a site in which people actively construct (and deconstruct) stories and use these stories to create situational selves. Interviews provided an occasion to view how black college women create desirable versions of themselves for us as white women. They thus allowed us to see how participants use particular stories in interaction with a sympathetic white, same-gender audience to make biographical claims, link themselves to other groups, and create symbolic boundaries. In the context of the one-on-one cross-racial interview, black women must perform racial gendered identities without the immediate collaboration of other black women. On one hand, this dynamic gave participants latitude in their identity work: the cross-racial interview meant that we, as white women, might be less likely to (or have less insider knowledge to be able to) challenge their racialized identity claims. The presence of other black women (either as interviewers or coparticipants) could activate concerns about "not being black enough" in ways that we, as white women, did not. Indeed, women often expressed disregard for, or discomfort with, some of the raced gender expectations they experienced in the company of other black women, using the interview to construct gendered racialized selves that disavowed some local expectations of black womanhood. At the same time, the absence of other black women with whom they could collaborate in their storytelling likely increased pressure on individual women to convey the contours of "authentic" black womanhood to the interviewers. Many took extra time to explain ideas or language they took for granted but assumed we did not know. Race is not the only thing that matters in interviews, however: as white women who worked at the university, we shared not only gendered common ground with the women we interviewed but also an understanding of the setting they were discussing. These similarities likely created an expectation that we would understand, if not share, intimate concerns that they might have been more reluctant to share with white men.

To understand "the functions stories serve in different situations" (Holstein

and Gubrium 1995:xvi), I used an inductive analytic strategy, attending not just to the content of the stories women tell but when and why they told them. During data collection, I wrote a number of analytic memos on emergent themes and discussed them with my research assistant and with colleagues. I read each interview transcript in its entirety to develop further coding themes, coded the data, and developed more refined coding strategies. I did not initially divide the data by gender but instead coded themes across the data set. After gender emerged as a salient analytic category, I analyzed the data on the men and women simultaneously, treating them as constant comparative categories. I used a similar comparative strategy to assess differences and similarities between universities; my charting of those categories, however, revealed more similarities than differences. This article focuses on the interviews with the women but uses the interviews with the men and participant-observation at formal and informal campus events to contextualize and explicate the women's accounts. These other sources of data allowed me to view women's storytelling outside of the interview context; participant-observation provided me with opportunities to observe women telling interracial stories to other audiences and in collaboration with other black women, while men's interviews yielded their own versions of, and responses to, women's stories.

In thinking of women's talk about interracial relationships as stories, I do not mean that participants always provided an extended account of interracial relationships within the interview setting. Indeed, they rarely did, as the narrative environment was oriented toward other topics. People do not have to tell an entire story to be engaged in storytelling, but can instead use talk to reference stories that exist outside of the interview context, as

the women frequently did here (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). In these interviews, women used interracial stories to explain other components of their experiences, not for the sake of telling "the interracial relationship story" itself. As Holstein and Gubrium (1995:xvi) argue, "storytellers do not just tell stories, they do things with them." In the analysis that follows, I examine the ways black women use interracial stories as resources to create and manage collective identities in the context of college.

BECOMING BLACK: RACE AND CLASS IN THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

Universities are important spaces for racial redefinition. College exposes students to classes, organizations, and speakers that politicize and historicize their race (and gender) identities, often for the first time (Shiao and Tuan 2008; Winddance Twine 1996). Here, I focus on the peer dynamics that led black women to redefine their racial identities and on the dilemmas entailed in the processes of redefinition. Interracial stories are central to these processes, providing a way to create collective raced gender identities despite significant individual differences.

For most of the women in this study, race was not salient before coming to college. It is not that they did not *know* they were racialized as black, but they thought of themselves as different from other black people and more like their middle-class non-black (usually white) peers. Fourteen women attended predominantly white schools as residents of the affluent white neighborhoods that housed their schools, rather than as "deseg"[regation] students from nearby cities. They participated in extracurricular activities with their non-black peers, such as violin, tennis, and chess club, and had a few close friends, none of whom were black. These

women confessed, with some embarrassment, that they had been afraid or disdainful of black girls and had sometimes joined their white friends in making fun of them. For example, Ashley used hair to distinguish herself from other black girls in her school: "One girl had a weave and we [she and her white friends] would go around picking up weave. . . . It was bad. My mom would always do my hair. [The other black girls'] hair wasn't done." Many had had their racial authenticity questioned by black peers before entering college, underscoring their sense of difference. They recall labels like: "the good black girl," "Oreo," "whitewashed," and "the white girl." Even the women who attended more racially diverse schools were often separated (by tracked classes, interests, and middle-class resources) from other black students and reported few black friends. Like other black middle-class girls in predominantly white high schools, these black women used their middle-class resources to adopt middle-class identities that they saw as more or less "race-neutral" (Winddance Twine 1996).

Most women in this study expected a smooth transition into college, anticipating that they would continue to have their class identities validated by white peers, would befriend white students, and would not be involved socially with black peers. They were shocked by their actual transition experiences, which featured both overt anti-black racism and more subtle exclusion from white networks. Aisha says, "The level of ignorance [on the part of white students] was way, way higher than I ever expected." Mei notes, "There's a lot of ignorant white folks up here, too. They just don't understand and they really don't care to. . . . I don't know, I guess people just talk to me like any type of way, and it's just like, 'Don't you hear yourself? That's stupid. You can't just say that to people!'"

Repeated hostile encounters with white students pushed women to think about themselves, newly, as black and to seek out other black students. Janae recalls that high school was "fine," but "Now [at Western] it's like, wow, I'm black. I really know I'm black now and I have to deal with every ignorant person asking me a question." Ashley laughs, "I told my friend if you had told me that all my friends would be black I never would have believed it." Sasha explains how she adopted a black identity in the face of negative experiences at Midwestern:

> Since I've been at [college], I've been so much more aware of it (race). Almost everyday, almost. I never realized my blackness until I came here. I never hung out with black people until I came here, never heard specific comments, like black people do this, white people do this and you (a black person) don't do this. I never had such encounters with aggressive racism since I've been here: got on the bus with black friends, [and heard] "nigger, get to the back of the bus."

And Madison says, "Because [in high school] I didn't see a difference between [races]. . . . But here, it's almost like, you have to identify."

The visibility of race in their daily experiences meant that for many of the women in this study, race trumped class in their self-understandings for the first time. Women who had been accepted as middle class in high school found their class credentials routinely questioned by their white college peers. Most participants had middle-class origins, but white university students assumed otherwise. Many women were astounded by white students' refusal to recognize their class identities and their insistence that all black people conform with "ghetto" stereotypes, as Kendra illustrates:

I'm always a surprise or a shock when I'm in my classes, because I'm the only black person in my class, and it's like, I don't know, very . . . they expect you to be ghetto or poor or something like that, and then they find out that you're smart, and either they really don't want to talk to you then, or they're scared to talk to you.

Tiffany says, "So I guess when I'm talking to white people, I feel like I have to assert myself and make sure that they know that I'm not stupid because I'm black." Because of experiences like these, black women had to learn *how* to be black while also anchoring their position as middle class. These intertwined processes required women with a range of class backgrounds to organize their identities around a shared black middle-class identity.

For many women who had distanced themselves from black identities before college, university entrance introduced them to ideas about blackness that fit their conceptions of what it meant to be middle class. Anna says that she began to think of herself as black because "Just being around black people who aren't, who I can relate to. A lot of the black kids in high school had that ghetto attitude, ignorant." And Brenda explains:

High school into college, I think I was really starting to come to the fact that I was just a different kind of black person, because that's when I actually ran into other black people who were actually kind of like me, black folks, but they had different dimensions to 'em. They listened to different sorts of music, or they carried themselves in a different way. They didn't know every fuckin' rap song.

In college, women like Brenda and Anna encountered for the first time a middle-class black identity that allowed them to think of themselves as black *and*

middle class. Like other members of the black middle class (Lacy 2007), these women learned to construct middle-class blackness by drawing boundaries between themselves and class-disadvantaged blacks, distancing themselves from negative racial stereotypes by attributing them to *other* black people.

The collegiate black middle-class culture was not comfortable for everyone. Students from both working-class and elite backgrounds had to adjust their class performances to fit university expectations. Brandi comes from a rural working-class family. "[Midwestern] is like Harvard where I come from," she says. Brandi was initially alienated from other black students because she did not share their class resources and because she spoke with a rural accent that she felt made other black students see her as "unintelligent." She felt judged: "They were a lot different from what I expected. They were what I would have thought the white people would have been like." To fit in, Brandi needed to learn the codes of middle-class blackness used by Midwestern students. That she did so successfully is evidenced by changes in her friendship group over time: at first, Brandi made friends with class-disadvantaged white students, but by her senior year, Brandi had merged with black middle-class groups. Thus, for Brandi too, race eventually trumped class.

For other women, the public university brand of middle-class blackness felt alien because it was different from the upper-middle-class (and sometimes elite) black culture they had learned from their parents. Samantha explains:

It's silly now talking about it, but the talking, the culture, what they—I did not fit in. I didn't feel black enough. And I'm sure you might have heard that expression before. . . . I just still never feel like I fit in. I think it's

a lot about my experience. I've been very privileged. My mom makes insane amounts of money.

Like Brandi, upper-middle-class women learn some of the local expectations of middle-class blackness in order to be seen as "black enough." Grace reports, "I'm still very different. I think I found a niche. I'm still on the outskirts but I found friends who help me navigate the system." Stephanie "hated the black community" at Western, but she also came to think of herself as black, noting that: "When I came to this school, this was where I started noticing the race thing—a lot. Where I totally almost redefined myself."

In college, then, black women learned, tried on, and struggled with identities as *black middle-class women*. For many, connecting with other black women was neither easy nor straightforward. Creating a collective black middle-class womanhood required them to bridge significant differences in residential and regional backgrounds, racial competencies, and class resources. Because of these differences, many were uncomfortable with black student organizations and did not participate in them (see also Smith and Moore 2000). Thus, rather than having natural alliances with other black students, as outsiders commonly assume, they actively coordinated racial identities across internal differences. While women drew on an arsenal of symbols to create raced gender identities, interracial stories provided a common resource through which they achieved these goals. By telling interracial stories, black women "prove" that they are *authentic* black women while simultaneously learning what this identity means.

CLAIMING IDENTITIES THROUGH INTERRACIAL STORIES

Identity construction entails both boundary marking and meaning making; people

mobilize culture to claim and challenge categorization, to distinguish themselves from other groups, and to construct the content of their own race, class, and gender identities (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). The black college women in this study claim black womanhood, and craft its meaning, through both the act of storytelling and the content of the stories. I briefly sketch the central interracial story before showing how women use it to claim group membership, delineating insiders from outsiders. I then examine the ways interracial stories negotiate ideas about what black women are like.

Different people tell different stories about interracial relationships. The multiracial family movement plots interracial relationships as racially progressive (DaCosta 2007), while white supremacist organizations portray them as racially polluting (Ferber 1998). The interracial story I refer to here takes a different tack. It is told by some black women about all black women and is thus often portrayed as representative of black women's distinct intersectional perspective on interracial relationships (e.g., Childs 2005; Collins 2004). In this story, black men are only interested in white women because, in Mei's words, "Black guys can get white pussy really easily." Black men's enchantment by "easy" "jersey chasers" and "snow bunnies" leaves black women with no intimate prospects. Disadvantaged by these patterns, black women are (naturally) angry about relationships between black men and white women (Childs 2005). Desta summarizes, "There's a lot of tension among like black men and black women on this campus [because of] the idea that black men only talk to [interested in] white girls."

Many women in this study first encountered this interracial story after arriving at the university. This story is often told in academic spaces, and thus black college women may hear it in classes or at

community events. Interracial relationships are central to discussions in black campus organizations at Western and Midwestern, but only six women participated actively in these organizations. Sasha, who was not an active participant, heard the story from other black college women. In high school, she had embraced interracial relationships as racially progressive. Through her interactions with a black social network at Midwestern, she learned that black women object to black men's involvement with white women: "I know there was a period of time when I had a problem with it because I was surrounded by people who had a problem with it. 'Oh, look at him with her' [black women say]. I guess I was the angry black woman for a period." As she explains, interactions with other black women and their routine, repetitive objection to relationships between black men and white women led her to change her feelings about these relationships. Through her reference to "the angry black woman," Sasha positions the interracial story as a sign of a particular kind of black womanhood—one that is predicated on a shared, if stigmatized, emotion. As Sasha adjusted to campus life, she adopted the interracial story as her own, began to notice and identify black man–white woman couples, and interpreted her heightened observations as corroboration of the story. She gets angry, she says, when she's "working over at the athletic offices listening to the black athletes [bragging about] 'I had a white girl' as if she's something to be achieved, not because he really likes her."

Like Sasha, most women in this study report that they became concerned, or first encountered other black women's concerns, with interracial dating after they came to the university. Only one woman (Brandi, the rural working-class woman discussed earlier) reported having concerns about interracial couples before

coming to college, and ten explicitly explained that their views had changed radically during their college years. These women were likely to be from suburban backgrounds with predominantly white friends, but women who had had black high school friends also reported changing their attitudes. Anna, a Midwestern student from the suburbs, notes the importance of the university context to hearing and learning this story, "I never noticed it until I came up here . . . I think since I came to [Midwestern], like you hear a lot about black women getting upset about black men dating white women." And Yemisi, a Western woman who grew up with black friends in an urban area, reflects on how her attitude has changed since coming to Western, "All my cousins, not all but a lot of them are with non-black women, mainly white. Now [in college] it pisses me off but it didn't before. Like when they got married, I was happy, you know. Two families uniting. But now when I look at it, it makes me mad." Mei attended a predominantly white private school but grew up in an urban area. She says that interracial relationships "didn't faze me . . . until I came [to Western] and I just got frustrated with all these guys." Black women's college experiences—encountering new ways of viewing interracial relationships from peers and in classes, the heightened visibility of black students' intimate choices (Ray and Rosow 2009), and the importance of intimate relationships to women's gender identities (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009)—all may contribute to their reinterpretation of interracial relationships. But Mina, a Western student, reveals how daily interactions reinforce this reinterpretation:

> Just when you're sitting and talking, you might see somebody pass and you'll be like—somebody might say a comment. "Oh, I didn't know he

was talking to her." Or they'll just make the assumption that they have sex, and people will just get carried away. And that's just gossiping.

Brandi, who objected mildly to interracial couples before coming to college, also notes the ways peer interactions heighten the policing of interracial couples at Midwestern. "It's not a place to be interracial," she says. Thus, interactions with other black women solidify women's reinterpretations of interracial relationships and teach them to look for and appraise black man–white woman dyads; these processes, in turn, fuel their negative feelings about them.

The process of learning and telling a story teaches people to align their own experiences with a shared narrative and generates emotions that make the story feel authentic (Wilkins 2008a). As women enter college and encounter other black college women, they learn that black women are disadvantaged by interracial dating and are angry about it. Telling these stories themselves, in turn, becomes a way for them to claim membership in a shared gendered racial group. The interracial story links them to other black women and demonstrates the authenticity of their black femininity. Through their own animated storytelling, they create and exhibit anger and claim a set of experiences and dispositions that mark them as black women. As they adopt and tell the stories, they identify their interests with other black women, rather than with non-black women, black men, or other members of the middle class.

Brenda, the only woman in this study who is not interested in dating men herself, was a vociferous interracial narrator. I observed the ways Brenda told the interracial story in multiple contexts, using it both to connect to other black women and to mark the boundary between her and white women. Because Brenda has no intimate stake in black men's practices, her storytelling makes especially clear the use of interracial stories to do public identity work. In Brenda's case, storytelling is perhaps all the more important because, involved with a white woman (and aware of the contradictions this relationship creates, as she says, "I am the black man I love to hate"), she violates multiple expectations about black women's sexuality. By participating in the interracial story, she links herself to the public concerns of (heterosexual) black women.

Three of the women in this study, in contrast, neither adopted the interracial story nor felt connected to other black women. Other women portrayed interracial relationships as a sign that black men are uninterested in black women and that they should not, consequently, bother pursuing them, but neither Samantha nor Kayla objected to black men's relationships with white women and both actively pursued intimate relationships with black college men. Madison primarily dates white men. Not coincidentally, all three women are biracial—Kayla and Madison have white mothers and Samantha a white father. Other research suggests that dating black men can be a way for biracial women to claim racial allegiance with black students (Winddance Twine 1996); in this case, however, Samantha and Kayla's relationships with black men undermined their claims to racially authentic identities as black women. Their counterexample further illustrates the centrality of the interracial story (including its presumption of independence, discussed in the following) to black college women's collective identity work.

NEGOTIATING MEANING THROUGH INTERRACIAL STORIES

By telling interracial stories, black women create and manage collective

ideas about what black women are *like*. Interracial stories draw on, and manipulate, a cultural image of black women as strong, independent, and angry. This "controlling image" provides a cultural template around which black women imagine gendered racial authenticity, even when they do not embody these characteristics themselves. In this section, I show how this process works.

Performing Independence

Telling interracial stories is an act of outspoken independence, and some women dramatize these characteristics in collective confrontations with black men. The interracial story itself is an act of "talking back" to black men (and to white women). The story routinely calls into question black men's behavior and prerogatives—not just among black women but to the men as well. As such, it reinforces the idea that black women are angry, outspoken, and independent (that is, not willing to comply with black men's expectations). This effect occurs even when some women do not engage in direct confrontation. Desta explains that she and Yemisi "would always ask, I guess you could say interrogate, these black dudes on campus. Like ask them: why is it that you only date white girls?" These confrontations, she confesses, do not create mutual understanding between black women and men but instead reinforce collective ideas about each group: "And then [the men would] be like, man, that's why I don't talk to you black girls, because you are crazy. And that's what we'd be deemed: we'd be deemed crazy . . . basically." Such confrontations allow individual black women to "speak their minds" about an issue that makes them angry; at the same time, they contribute to commonsense ideas about what "all" black (college) women are like.

At both universities, formal joint storytelling transpires in community forums and, occasionally, classrooms. Nick, one of six football players, recalled a debate about a debate about interracial dating that broke out in his ethnic studies class, one of the few classroom spaces at Western that hosts multiple black students. By pitting black women against black men, the debate coalesced gendered racial identities. In such settings, individual women (and men) do not have to speak to be included in the collective identity (as long as they do not negate it): participants and onlookers perceive black women (and black men) as coherent groups with united, opposing interests. Ekon, one of three gay men, notes the homogenizing effect of such debates: "You know what I mean, it's all talk here and there and then people are like okay and they fall into this assumption . . . and it [ideas about what black women and black men are like] just becomes reality." Comments from diversely situated men supported the idea that black women "all have attitudes," start "all this drama," and "get in [men's] faces" (Wilkins 2012). The outspokenness of some black women nourishes the idea that all black women are outspoken and independent.

Narrating, or colluding in, interracial stories allows black women to be seen, and to see themselves, as strong and independent as a group despite individual and contextual variations in their interpersonal behavior. Not all women feel comfortable "speaking their minds," and even the most outspoken feel burdened by the expectation that they will always do so. Brenda laments the personal costs of this image: "We'd just always have to be these very strong, non-emotional, almost militant women all the time, all the damn time. And it got tirin', it got frustratin.'" Some women recall learning that black women should be "strong" from their mothers or older black women, but many

were instead socialized into race-neutral, middle-class gender identities, in which girls are expected to be "nice" and black children are taught to be deferential (Froyum 2010). Aware of the expectation that black women *should* speak out, Grace confesses, "I'm not comfortable challenging people; I always think I don't have a right to say anything." Thus, in the university, women like Grace encounter emotional expectations that feel uncomfortable or inauthentic and that conflict with their prior classed race and gender socialization. Interracial stories, however, occlude these discrepancies between lived experiences and cultural expectations, allowing black women to share in the assumption that black women are outspoken even when they are not.

Boundary Work

The content of interracial stories also fashions black women as strong, independent, and angry through symbolic boundaries with both black men and white women. In interracial stories, black men date white women because they are "easy"—both in the sense that they are willing to have sex and in the sense that they are nonconfrontational. In these stories, not only are white women weak for being willing to be used by black men, but black men are also weak for going after the "easy" white women who do not "challenge" them. Brenda's and Aisha's reactions to interracial couples are illustrative. Brenda, the Midwestern woman in a relationship with a white woman, says:

> I have yet to really meet a white woman who has the backbone of a black woman. Again, I'm bein' very general. Or in my experience, I'll say in my experiences. She can front . . . and try to play that role, but not for real. She's a fuckin' pushover. . . .

And I feel like, "Man, you bitch-ass. You can't handle somebody with a motherfuckin' [backbone]." . . . Too, I think that he doesn't have a backbone. He just wants fuckin'. He just wants to ball her. He doesn't want anybody to challenge him.

Aisha is a leader in the Black Student Union (BSU) at Western:

> Like, and I would get mad at them because I have really high expectations of, like black men. Cuz it's like black men with white women. And I have really high expectations and like talking to the black men on this campus they're like well, she's easy, she's right there, why not. Like they don't care for her or like, I don't know. They just don't respect her as much as they should. And so that's when I had the big problem with interracial dating. I was like so why are you with her? Like [men say], "well are you mad cuz I'm not with you?" I'm like, no, because you couldn't handle me as a black woman, but why are you putting *her* through that?

Mei, an athlete at Western who is uninvolved with the BSU, says,

> Like, a lot of them are ditsy. They're stupid. I just think they're playin' games . . . [it's] a trap. . . . And then black guys don't want to step up to the sisters because we're either too independent, too smart, [or have] too much attitude for them to deal with. They need something stupid or somethin'.

Despite their diverse locations within campus communities, these women's accounts all rely on similar constructions of interracial relationships and of white women, black men, and black women, revealing the degree to which different black college women learn and adopt

similar interracial frames. By expressing disgust (and sometimes pity) for the behavior of white women and black men, black women convey their own distinctive attributes and values as strong, independent people. Thus, both the act of telling interracial stories and the content of the stories themselves link black college women to an idea of black womanhood as strong, outspoken, and independent, sustaining the idea that these characteristics are inherent to black womanhood even when individual black college women do not embody them. In this way, these women use interracial stories to make claims about what black college women are like, but they do so by drawing on existing cultural templates.

Some women collude in interracial storytelling but eschew its emotions. Mina provides an example. On one hand, she distances herself from anti-interracial relationship attitudes, associating them with other black women:

> I think it depends on the woman, but I think that the women that don't agree with it are pretty passionate about it. So people might be taken aback by it. I just feel like the people that I've heard just don't hold back. They feel like they need to let you know their opinion. But I'm just like, people are gonna do whatever they want to do, and if they want to be together, cool. I don't really care. I'm not personally attracted to anybody at this school. . . . I'll be like, "It's pretty pointless to talk about it." 'Cause whether or not you're supporting or not, it's happening. I'm a really nonchalant person.

On the other hand, Mina provides several examples of her own participation in interracial storytelling, portraying it as routine rather than exceptional. For example, describing a black friend who is the subject of gossip about his interracial practices, she says, "What I meant by

that is that they'll just be like—I mean, technically, I kind of agree, so I can't really fend for him too much." Thus, Mina uses interracial stories to participate in black spaces and to make sense of her experiences, but she distances herself from its association with anger, fashioning herself instead as "nonchalant."

Two kinds of women were most likely to adopt this strategy: those whose identities were firmly anchored in another component of black femininity (like Mina, who is a member of black student organizations and who is adept at stepping and braiding black hair) and women about to graduate. Many seniors attributed anger over interracial relationships to their younger selves, claiming that they have "gotten over it," even while they continue to tell interracial stories. Perhaps, by distancing themselves from the (stigmatized) emotions, women in their senior year prepare for the expectations they will encounter as they transition back out of the university.

INDEPENDENCE, CLASS, AND IDENTITY CONTRADICTIONS

Contradictions among and between gender, race, and class expectations complicate black women's use of independence as an identity strategy. The expectations of middle-class femininity continue to demand that women seek and attend to romantic relationships, penalizing them for being too independent (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Race heightens this problem for middle-class black women because controlling images portray black women's "independence" as a sign of their failed femininity, a key component of the (putative) "tangle of pathology" driving persistent black poverty and the cause of black men's "emasculation" (Collins 2004). Thus, independence may be racially "authentic," but it conflicts with other gender and class expectations and,

by evoking "ghetto" stereotypes of black women, further destabilizes claims to middle-class status—claims that are already challenged by white students. Moreover, these images shape interactive interpretations of black women's independence, leading to perceptions that they are always angry, as several women, like Janae, noted wryly: "I slowly but surely became the outcast, that black bitch, you know. . . . And you know it just so happens that because I'm black, I'm the mean black girl." Thus, while women may value independence, they also recognize the ways it can be used against them.

Black middle-class women have a long history of using strategies of respectability to resolve the contradictions between middle-class femininity and economic independence (Collins 2004; White 2001). Here, interracial stories offer them an additional cultural tool in these efforts. First, the premise of interracial stories— that black women are upset that black men pursue relationships with white women—performs women's commitment to heterosexual relationships in the absence of actual relationships. By telling interracial stories, women suggest that if black men did not make such bad choices (i.e., white women), black women would not be single. For example, Mei says, "black guys in college don't want to have a real commitment with a black sister." Tiffany contends, "I've talked to a lot of people, and a lot of females that are black here, and it's just like, it's a waste of time to try to approach a black guy here, because they're not really about having an actual relationship." Women thus attribute their independence to black men's behavior, not their own. In addition, many proclaim their "love" for black men symbolically, through participation in things like Facebook groups such as "black women who love black men" or by talking about their fantasies of marrying a black man.

Interracial stories also craft black women's respectability through symbolic boundaries portraying relationships between black men and white women as "sex relationships, not love." Stephanie says: "Because of the way the guy dresses and the way the girl dresses together. . . . You can kind of go, you people aren't really together. You're just like fucking." Tiffany explains, black men "just kind of like to score the whites." Lauren makes the boundary clear: black men, she says, want "easy girls, and I'm not that. I'm not that at all. I'm totally the opposite." Black women underscore their distaste for "sex relationships" by making exceptions for interracial relationships that seem to be motivated by love, as Ashley does: "I think it's [an interracial relationship is] okay if it's for the right reasons. . . . Love." By condemning "sex" relationships, black women distance themselves from casual sexuality and suggest that they are holding out for real love.

Rather than claiming independence predicated on sexual freedom, these stories invest independence with moral and cultural worth by tying it to heterosexual respectability. This strategy manages some of the potential costs of independence but at the expense of sexual agency. Furthermore, it ironically undermines black women's claims to independence by binding women to a romantic strategy predicated on relationships and by tying them to the controlling image of the black lady (Collins 2004), in which black women are able to participate in middle-class spaces only be denying their own sexuality. Thus, black women use interracial stories in creative ways to manipulate tensions in their identities, but the stories themselves are constrained by the contradictions within and between race, gender, and class expectations.

DISCUSSION: INTIMATE STORIES AND IDENTITY DILEMMAS

Interracial stories take as their subject black women's concern over their intimate possibilities on predominantly white university campuses. In treating interracial relationships as a set of stories, I have bracketed these concerns, focusing instead on the broader social purposes of interracial storytelling. At the same time, the stories themselves construct those concerns. As we have seen, women report not having been distressed about interracial relationships until they came to college and learned to attach new meaning to those relationships. To be sure, black college women face much more severely limited intimate choices than do other college students, and they make their intimate choices in the context of sexual stereotypes that increase the risks attached to all women's sexual behavior. But these are not their only, or even their primary, concerns. In the context of heightened racial identity awareness, women use the assumption of a shared gendered sexual experience to create common ground across an array of differences. Here, interracial stories are a form of boundary work used to claim membership in a gendered and classed racial group, to define what it means to be a member of that group, and to negotiate issues of authenticity, belonging, and community.

In this article, I have focused on the ways black women adopt and tell interracial stories in the larger context of the college. The women in this study learn to tell interracial stories in the process of constructing identities as black college women, using these stories to create gendered racial alliances and to link black womanhood to characteristics of strength and independence. Interviews provide one context in which this identity work occurs. As interviewers, we rarely asked specifically about interracial relationships; instead, participants volunteered interracial stories in the process of narrating their experiences as black women on predominantly white campuses. In this context, interracial stories did not so much express concerns about their intimate lives as more broadly convey what it means to be a black college woman and harness individual biographies to collective racialized gender narratives. In interviews, women tell interracial stories without the collaborative help of other black women. Yet, other black women enter the interview implicitly as women weave stories about campus life and about the stories they hear other women tell. In this way, participants are still able to use the individual context of the interview to coordinate their identities with other black women. Interracial storytelling linked their personal stories to more widely held raced gender concerns and embedded them in a network of raced gender peers. At the same time, black college women used interracial stories to create impressions of themselves as strong and independent. Interracial stories—both the act and the content—differentiate black women from white women and from black men. By telling unflattering, sometimes derisive, stories about white women to an audience of white women, participants exhibited the strength and outspokenness they associate with black womanhood. Telling these stories demonstrated their unwillingness to conform to the rules of comportment (being "nice") they associate with white women or to the "weakness" and unwillingness to speak out about racial issues they associate with black men (see Wilkins 2012). Thus, as white women, we provided a resource in their identity work.

An analysis of intimate stories complicates and extends feminist work on the intersections of sexuality with race, class, and gender. Gender, class, and race

interact to create unique sexual dilemmas for black women (Collins 2004; Crenshaw 1991; Rose 2003). Collins (2004:11) contends: "Sexuality also can be seen as a site of intersectionality, a specific constellation of social practices that demonstrate how oppressions converge." For example, because of race and gender inequality, black women experience higher rates of prostitution and rape. Thus, broader social inequalities shape and constrain sexual desires and experiences. Interracial stories seem to both respond to and reveal these disadvantages. Indeed, Childs (2005) argues that black women's vocal opposition to interracial relationships bespeaks the combination of gender and racial disadvantages they face in the heterosexual market.

I do not dispute this interpretation, but I have advanced a different treatment of these stories here. Treating intimate stories as cultural vehicles used to construct meaning yields a distinct, more complex understanding of the multiple and competing dilemmas black women face. My approach to intimate stories makes two specific contributions to this literature. First, it allows a more complete understanding of the intersection of sexuality with gender, class, and race by addressing not only the ways other identity categories mold sexual practices but also the ways in which ideas about sexuality can be used to claim, defend, and manipulate gendered and classed racial meanings. Second, it resists the reification of sexuality by treating sexuality as a system of meanings mobilized by differently situated people in different ways for different race and gender purposes.

Intimate stories do not emerge only out of sexual concerns but out of a broader array of identity dilemmas. In her work on Mexican American high school girls, Bettie (2003) argues that focusing on their sexuality occludes the ways in which their identity performances are also shaped by race and class concerns, and thus leads them to be misinterpreted. Similarly, focusing only on the explicit intimate content of interracial storytelling misapprehends the range of concerns at stake in intimate storytelling, and thus the complex ways in which "oppressions converge." In this case, to take interracial stories only at face value oversimplifies the identity dilemmas embedded in them and instead reinforces the idea that black women are only victims of others' intimate choices, concealing the ways in which they are also savvy cultural actors responding in creative ways to their disadvantageous position. Such a perspective thus also has the potential to reify sexual concerns, positions, or meanings as *real*, rather than as cultural products constituted by, and constitutive of, gender, race, and class. In the case at hand, a focus on black women's heterosexual disadvantage (re)constitutes the centrality of heterosexuality to black womanhood.

Interracial stories provide a window on the processes through which identities are co-constituted. By telling intimate stories, people create gendered racial identities. First, in this case, intimate stories achieve gendered racial identities by using assumptions about gendered common ground to create racial solidarity. The centrality of gender to this process means that the interviewers' shared womanhood likely facilitated interracial storytelling in the interview. Intimate stories are thus a site where broader gender concerns may be folded into race to create specific gendered racial identities. Interracial stories build on broader gendered tales in which women are the victims of, or turn the tables on, men and imbue these tales with specific racial content. Race serves as an additional plot device at the same time that the stories themselves construct racial meanings. In this case, then, sexuality is a gendered resource used to create racial identities. Through storytelling,

women draw on their common position as women to articulate their identities as black.

Second, intimate stories harness gender to race by activating gendered racial concerns that go beyond sexuality itself. Racial groups use sexual stories to create, reinforce, or resist racial hierarchies by drawing on gendered moral boundaries in which "our" women are positioned as sexually purer than "yours" (Donovan 2003; Espiritu 2001; Nagel 2000; Wilkins 2004). The sexual stories here draw on morality, but they also activate other kinds of cultural boundaries. Characteristics of strength and independence may evoke sexual and moral meanings, and may be enacted through sexual practices, but are not exclusive to them.

Although intimate stories are not just about sex, the use of intimacy to articulate broader gender and racial concerns limits the transformative potential of women's identity work. First, stories about intimate relationships focus attention on close relationships of power and not the broader power structures in which those relationships are forged. Interracial stories both emphasize and construct black women's gendered interests vis-à-vis black men and, to a lesser extent, white women. White men, and their role in shaping hierarchies of power and desirability, are largely absent. Thus, by telling stories that identify intimacy as a key problem for black students and interracial intimacy as black women's central concern, these stories divert attention from institutional racism and from white men's position of power in gendered racial hierarchies. This use of intimate stories focuses, importantly, on the gendered allocation of intraracial power but to the exclusion (or minimization) of interracial power, especially as it is manifested between white *men* and black women.

Second, by coordinating gendered racial identities around intimate concerns and by linking these concerns to gendered racial authenticity, intimate stories maintain the centrality of intimacy to gendered racial identities. Thus, the stories told to manage identity dilemmas themselves contain a dilemma: How can black women construct meaningful gendered racial identities that do not hinge on heterosexuality? Interracial stories sustain the idea that heterosexual intimacy is a key mechanism of community, social justice, and racial authenticity. They thus make it hard to imagine ways to create racial community through other kinds of social ties or in ways that are inclusive of cross-racial intimacies.

CONCLUSION: STORIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

As the basis for "us" versus "them" claims, cultural images use ideas about gender and class to solidify and justify macro-level hierarchies between racial groups (Collins 2004). These images impose cultural stereotypes on gendered and classed racial groups, but social actors also negotiate these images, using them to claim, repudiate, stretch, and make meaningful race, gender, and class identities in everyday life. My analysis illustrates the ways people use stories to create and manage everyday intersectional identities; the dynamic relationship between, on one hand, the adaptability of stories and storytelling and, on the other hand, the constraints of gendered, raced, and classed cultural images; and the ways stories use ideas about intimacy to suture gender to classed racial identities. In the case at hand, gender is both a resource used to create racial authenticity and collectivity and a constraint on the imagination of those identities.

Stories are cultural resources people use to claim, maneuver, and give meaning to gendered and classed racial identities in everyday life. Storytelling transforms

individuals with diverse backgrounds and interests into a shared status group with common concerns, dispositions, goals, and strategies. As a form of identity work, stories delineate membership in a shared status group and craft the meaning of those identities. Stories create collectivity by eclipsing internal differences and accentuating external boundaries. Effective boundary marking requires stories to be told to audiences against whom boundaries are being drawn (e.g., black men and, in the case of the interviews, white women). Cultural images impose meaning, but these images can also be appropriated, via storytelling, to develop strategies for navigating everyday identity dilemmas. Through storytelling, people do not just adopt cultural images but put them to work for their own purposes.

Stories thus exist in a dynamic relationship with culture. Stories both shape, and are shaped by, existing cultural meanings (e.g., controlling images), bridging the analytical gap between chosen and imposed identities. My analysis shows how this happens. Here, stories manipulate cultural images associated with racial identities by building on presumptive ideas about those identities, concealing distinctions between lived experience and identity expectations, evoking and articulating an emotional response that helps people experience their identities as authentic, recalibrating the images to fit a specific constellation of concerns, and resisting the discrediting meaning of the images by linking them to morally creditable characteristics. Black college women learn to tell shared stories in a context of increased racial salience in which they need to, newly, coordinate their identities with co-racials. They use these stories, in turn, to construct autobiographical accounts, thus centering them in their own experiences. Their storytelling reproduces existing cultural images, in part, because these images provide a template

for gendered racial authenticity in the absence of other grounds for racial collectivity and because these images are then integrated into women's stories about themselves, becoming components of their identity work.

Stories are limited by both the dynamic of storytelling itself and by the identity contradictions that mobilize storytelling in the first place. First, telling stories gives storytellers authorship, allowing them to use cultural images strategically, but the adaptability of stories limits storytellers' control over them. Stories are told to audiences, and audiences can interpret stories in diverse ways, embedding them in their own network of stories. In telling their stories to white researchers with greater cultural authority, participants risked having us dismiss or misinterpret their stories, but, as I have argued, the outsider can also be a resource in the storytelling, allowing narrators to delineate boundaries and effectively perform identity content. Similarly, Polletta (2006) argues that the ambiguity in stories makes them useful for creating collective identities. Because stories can be interpreted in multiple ways, people can use them to manufacture connections to others for the purposes of finding (or creating) common ground, but the ambiguity of stories also opens them up to multiple interpretations and uses. Thus, while storytellers may attempt to use stories to rework cultural images, other stakeholders may translate them in ways that confirm stereotypes.

Second, black women's ability to use stories to recraft their identities is also limited by the complexity of their identity problems. The experiences of the women in this study provide striking evidence of the unlivability of black women's identities. Women navigate these complexities by telling multiple stories, working to achieve gendered racial identities that are strong and independent (racially authentic) but are still respectable

(feminine and middle class). Their efforts to tie independence to respectability, however, are destabilized by the cultural incompatibility of these characteristics, the severely limited terms on which black women can claim respectability, and the impossibility of an unmarked (i.e., "ordinary") subject position for black women. Their stories employ specific tactics that tie them to narrow gendered racial identities, but these tactics emerge from the logic (or illogic) of their gendered racial identity work itself. In the end, then, the women in this study both control and are controlled by controlling images. Although their identity dilemmas are particularly untenable, identity contradictions are not unique to black women. Instead, they are more general features of intersectionality, at least for groups who experience at least one dimension of categorical marginality. My previous research suggests that the complex intersections of race and gender, and the contradictions among them, also constrain white women in their efforts to recreate their gendered identities (Wilkins 2008b). These contradictions, in turn, raise important questions about how people use stories to create coherent identities in the face of incoherent resources.

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BIO

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