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A Battleground of Identity: Racial Formation and the African American Discourse on Interracial Marriage

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This article utilizes a sample of letters to the editor from African American newspapers to investigate racial identity formation. Drawing on an analysis of 234 letters, published predominantly between 1925 and 1965, I examine how African American writers discussed black-white intermarriage. Writers used the issue of intermarriage to negotiate conceptions of racial identity and the politics of racial emancipation. Because of its strong symbolic implications, the intermarriage discourse became a “battleground of identity” for the conflict between two competing racial ideologies: integrationism and separatism. The battleground concept elucidates why some debates become polarized, and why it is so difficult to arbitrate them. I argue that identity battlegrounds may emerge around emotionally charged and concrete but heavily symbolic issues that densely link to key ideas in the ideological systems of two or more conflicting movements. They must be issues that none of the movements can cease to compete over without surrendering their political essence. Keywords: racial formation; racial politics; interracial marriage; discourse analysis; content analysis.

In his book, *Is Marriage for White People* (2011), Ralph Richard Banks examines the disproportional decline of marriage among African Americans. After discussing the causes and consequences of this decline, Banks concludes that black women should consider interracial marriage in order to find suitable spouses. During his book tour, Banks’s message was received with some vitriol. “At some events,” writes the *Economist* (Anonymous 2011:40), “black men accused Ralph Richard Banks of advocating genocide.” Many women did not prove more receptive: “black women still regard intermarriage as tantamount to betraying the race” (Anonymous 2011:40).

As this example demonstrates, intermarriage remains contested among African Americans, although approval rates among blacks (as well as whites) have increased since the 1960s (Root 2001). Researchers find that black opposition often derives from a historically rooted sense of racial solidarity and group closure in the face of white oppression (Chito Childs 2005; Hill Collins 2004). This opposition reflects the ideological legacy of black separatism (Marable and Mullings 1994). However, African Americans are not—and have not been—ideologically unified around this position. Integrationists reasoned that intermarriage could vitally contribute to overcoming racism and racial divisions. Such hopes are still expressed today (see Telles and Sue 2009 for a critical discussion).

In contemplating these competing interpretations of intermarriage, it is important to realize that, more than simply naming a dyadic relationship, intermarriage constitutes a political symbol. Indeed, in this article, I argue that much of the conflict about intermarriage revolves around the political symbolism of intermarriage. I examine a historical sample of letters to the editor published by African American newspapers, which reveals the political entanglements of interracial marriage. The discourse on interracial marriage, I claim, served as an important site of racial identity

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formation (Omi and Winant 1986; for a recent review, see Saperstein, Penner, and Light 2013). More specifically, intermarriage became a central symbol in the conflict over two competing visions of black politics and the meaning of race, integrationism, and separatism—the dominant streams of black politics throughout the twentieth century (Marable and Mullings 1994; Omi and Winant 1986; Wilson 1973).

The significance of intermarriage as a political symbol derived from the intricate symbolic connections between intermarriage, conceptions of race, and the politics of racial emancipation. I find that intermarriage carried fundamentally incongruent meanings for integrationist and separatist letter writers. While integrationists thought of intermarriage as a tool for overcoming the artificial barriers of race in American society, separatists regarded it as an impediment to racial emancipation. My analysis illuminates these competing claims and the rhetorical strategies that writers used to link far-reaching political and racial concepts to the seemingly personal realm of marriage (Best 1987).

In order to explain these high levels of politicization and polarization, I examine intermarriage as a “battleground of identity,” a contentious discourse with crucial implications for the identities of at least two mutually opposed movements—integrationists and separatists, in this case. After analyzing the individual arguments writers relied on, I move from the single letters and their arguments to the level of the discourse as a field of political communication. I argue that many writers deployed their letters in direct awareness of their arguments’ symbolic implications and how they related to their political opposition. This explains why the discourse became so heated and polarized: writers knew that more was at stake than just intermarriage. Although organized around the issue of intermarriage, the discourse was not so much about the actual phenomenon of intermarriage at all. Rather, writers used the subject of intermarriage to struggle over much broader visions of race and politics.

Applying the concept of identity battlegrounds to the discourse on interracial marriage, this article contributes to racial formation theory and the closely related study of ethnic boundaries (e.g., Barth 1969; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Marx 1998; Omi and Winant 1986; Saperstein et al. 2013; Wimmer 2013). First, it attempts to bridge the gap between individuals’ racial identities and large-scale processes of racial formation. Most racial formation research highlights the interplay between powerful actors and institutions, such as movement leaders and the state (Marx 1998; Omi and Winant 1986). Some scholars have also begun to systematically investigate microsocial racial transformations (Saperstein and Penner 2012; Vasquez 2011). But as Aliya Saperstein, Andrew Penner, and Ryan Light (2013) have recently argued, racial formation research now has to bridge the gap between societal processes of racial formation and the individuals who come to “inhabit” the identities in question. This article is an effort to contribute to this task.

Linking different levels of racial formation, I analyze single letters as individual statements of racial politics and identity, as well as how those statements agglomerate to form larger discursive patterns. I do not argue that integrationism and separatism emerged through bottom-up discourse. Rather, the intermarriage discourse allowed individuals to interpret, enact, and further distribute racial ideology. Due to its palpable subject and far-reaching implications, the intermarriage discourse engendered widespread participation. This matters, because many individuals have to adopt racial identities in order for these identities to become socially salient. One of the ways in which this can happen, I argue, is popular discourse.

Additionally, this article centers on intragroup struggles over the best way to challenge the racial hierarchy. Most research in the tradition of racial formation and ethnic boundaries focuses more or less exclusively on the conflicts between dominant and subordinated groups, while within-group heterogeneity and conflict is downplayed or ignored entirely. By contrast, in this article, I examine how African American writers debated the merits of two very different strategies of racial formation. Separatists highlighted the racial boundaries between blacks and whites, while integrationists attempted to deemphasize them.

While I here apply the battleground concept to an issue in the sociology of race and ethnicity, I introduce this concept for the interpretation of polarized discourse more broadly. Battlegrounds

of identity may emerge around any issue that at least two opposing movements of any kind come to perceive as symbolically crucial to their cause (on opposing movements, see Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). On the basis of my findings, as well as a comparison of the intermarriage discourse with the abortion debate in the discussion section, I suggest that battlegrounds of identity are likely to emerge around emotionally charged and concrete but heavily symbolic issues that densely link to key ideas in the ideological systems of two or more conflicting movements.

The Symbolism of Black-White Interracial Marriage

Interracial marriage between blacks and whites has received substantial attention from social scientists, including scholars of history and law (Moran 2001; Romano 2003; Wallenstein 2002), social demographers (Kalmijn 1993; Qian and Lichter 2007; Rosenfeld 2007), and qualitative researchers studying the experience of present-day interracial couples (Chito Childs 2005; Root 2001; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995). For the purpose of this article, the implications of interracial marriage for race relations are paramount.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American system of race relations underwent crucial change, from the “paternalism” of chattel slavery to “competitive industrialism” (Van den Berghe 1967). Significant social change destabilizes race relations and thus tends to engender new forms of legitimation, be they political, cultural, or scientific (Blumer 1958; Omi and Winant 1986). Sustaining the racial distribution of labor and resources now meant resisting integration. Whites anxiously defended the segregation of neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and other social settings.

Scholars have often noted that fears over black sexuality—and their strategic amplification—were at the core of those efforts (e.g., Hill Collins 2004; Myrdal 1944). The “threat” of miscegenation became shorthand for the dangers of integration. For instance, community studies in Chicago and Detroit identify intermarriage as a key symbol for white resistance against integration (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993; Sugrue 2005). The “defense” of white womanhood from black men became a major pillar of the Northern color line and Southern Jim Crow. Actual rates of black-white intermarriage remained low, but the occasional prominent case as well as fictional accounts engendered controversy and public disapproval (Romano 2003). Broadly speaking, this represents the macrosocial context of interracial marriage until the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, as well as the Supreme Court’s 1967 decision to overturn all anti-miscegenation laws (for more detailed accounts, see Moran 2001; Romano 2003; Wallenstein 2002).

Given this charged context, it is no wonder that African Americans would have taken up the issue, because fears over black sexuality were invoked to justify segregation and thereby directly affected black life chances. Nonetheless, this context by no means determined *how* African Americans would engage the question of intermarriage. Group internal conflict over strategies of racial emancipation and the meaning of race manifested themselves in disagreements over interracial marriage. These are the factors I focus on in this article.

The issue of intermarriage served as a site for the conflict between integrationism and separatism, the two dominant camps of twentieth-century African American politics (Marable and Mullings 1994; Omi and Winant 1986; Wilson 1973). The intermarriage debate became a battleground of identity because of its far-reaching implications for racial identity and racial politics. In the context of this discourse, opinions on each issue—intermarriage, racial identity, and racial politics—coalesced. From a racial formation standpoint, the relationship between racial politics and conceptions of race is a simple matter. Any conception of race is inherently political, because it legitimates a certain distribution of resources (Omi and Winant 1986). But how did the issue of interracial marriage become entangled in this?

In the analysis, I demonstrate that writers used intermarriage as a metonym of integration. They could do so because intermarriage takes racial integration to its logical conclusion. It signifies

a degree of integration at which racial lines have become so permeable that even the most intimate of institutions—marriage—integrates. Intermarriage also signifies the bridging of previously disjointed communities, as marriage generates new kinship ties and biracial children connect racial groups. Blurring racial boundaries, such processes undermine the viability of race as a category of social organization. This is the declared goal of integrationism.¹ However, these processes also undercut the key separatist goals of autonomy and distance from white society.²

The conflicting implications of intermarriage made this symbol an issue of ideological struggle (Bakhtin 1986; Voloshinov 1986). Given the symbolic centrality of intermarriage for their respective programs, integrationists and separatists battled for ideological control over this symbol. In other words, the intermarriage discourse became a stage for a broader conflict. As my data reveal, letter writers were well aware of these implications. They propagated oppositional understandings of what race and racial boundaries mean and *should* mean, struggling over the political framing of interracial marriage. Was intermarriage a social problem? Or was it the solution to a social problem?

Data and Methods

To study the discourse on intermarriage, I drew on a sample of letters to the editor from five African American newspapers: the *Atlanta Daily World*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. This set represents the most influential black newspapers of the twentieth century (Pride and Wilson 1997; Washburn 2006).³ Before describing my sample and methods, I discuss black newspapers and letters to the editor as sources of data in relation to the task at hand.

African American newspapers served as an inclusive and important forum of public opinion until the 1960s (Burma 1947; Myrdal 1944; Pride and Wilson 1997; Washburn 2006). According to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton ([1945] 1993:399), black newspapers were “by far the most important agencies for *forming* and *reflecting* [emphasis added] public opinion.” I sampled letters to the editor rather than editorials, because letters represent a more immediate—although not unfiltered—form of public debate. Letter sections offer a forum for discussion, both creating and representing a public (Perrin and Vaisey 2008). A link in a chain of discourse, each letter constitutes an utterance that responds to previous utterances and anticipates potential responses (Bakhtin 1986).

Of course, letter writers self-select and editors filter materials before publication. Nonetheless, I argue that my sample reflects the scope of the intermarriage discourse. In order to ensure continued readership satisfaction, editors could not afford to ignore any significant opinion on matters of public interest. White-owned businesses hesitated to rely on black newspapers as advertising outlets. The papers thus had to draw most of their revenues from circulation and needed to maintain as wide a readership as possible (Burma 1947; Washburn 2006). Therefore, I do not expect

1. Integrationism has its roots in the fight for abolition and was further developed over the course of the civil rights movement. For exemplary statements of the integrationist tradition, see the works of Douglass (1866) and Luther King Jr. (1991).

2. Early exponents of separatism include the “back to Africa” separatists, such as Martin Delany and Marcus Garvey (Marx 1998). Later, separatists envisioned black autonomy within the United States; see the programmatic piece by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967).

3. At different points, the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* were the most widely circulated African American newspapers in the country (Washburn 2006). In 1920, the *Defender* claimed a circulation of 283,571, while the *Courier* peaked at 357,212 copies in 1947 (Washburn 2006). The *Los Angeles Sentinel* was the most widely read black newspaper west of the Mississippi (Pride and Wilson 1997). All five newspapers initiated or deeply influenced major political developments. The *Chicago Defender*, for instance, took an important role in encouraging and steering the great migration of blacks to the North in the 1910s (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993; Washburn 2006). The circulation and influence of most African American newspapers began to decline in the late '50s. For a discussion of this decline, see Washburn (2006).

Table 1 • Sample Features

Newspaper	Founded	Database Availability	Letters in Total Sample	Letters in Effective Sample
<i>Atlanta Daily World</i>	1928	1931–2003	6	3
<i>Chicago Defender</i>	1905	1910–1975	164	75
<i>Los Angeles Sentinel</i>	1933	1934–2005	23	11
<i>New York Amsterdam News</i>	1909	1922–1993	108	67
<i>Pittsburgh Courier</i>	1907	1911–2002	128	78
Total			429	234

the systematic suppression of any more or less popular position on intermarriage. In indirect support of this argument, I found that the sample reflects a wide variety of educational backgrounds, as indicated by the range of rhetorical sophistication: sentence structure, command of grammar and spelling, argument complexity, and so forth.

Having stated this, one important caveat should be addressed. Black-white intermarriage was illegal in California until 1948 and until 1967 in Georgia. This certainly influenced the editorial policies of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Atlanta Daily World*. Indeed, the *Sentinel* printed its first letter on interracial marriage in 1949. From then on, it published both favorable and critical letters, although any discussion of the subject remained rare (see Table 1). The *Atlanta Daily World*, over the entire period included in the sample, published only six relevant letters, none of which advocated intermarriage. The other three newspapers, from which I drew the majority of letters, published letters exploring a wide range of viewpoints.

Consequently, the sample exhibits a Northern bias, although several factors alleviate this issue. While the *Courier*, the *Defender*, and the *Amsterdam News* were all published in the North, they were widely distributed and read across the country (Washburn 2006). This extensive reach is indicated by the fact that many of the letters published in those three papers were written by people living in other cities and states, including the South. Therefore, the sample is more inclusive than the numbers in Table 1 suggest. Most importantly, however, I am not using this data set as a surrogate opinion poll, although the sample might in fact be the next best alternative, given that no polls are available for the historical period in question. Rather, the sample represents a single—but important—site of discourse and opinion formation. While the sample cannot be taken to represent public opinion, it does systematically represent the efforts to influence public opinion in a major forum. And although form and content may differ from other sites of discourse like the church or the family dinner table, the sample probably reflects all major arguments that people relied on to make their case.

I retrieved the letters from the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database⁴ through a series of full-text searches for terms such as “intermarriage,” “interracial,” and “miscegenation.” My goal was to find all relevant letters. I added new strings to the query by looking through downloaded letters for additional search terms. I did not restrict my search to marriage, instead looking for any letters dealing with any form of interracial intimacy. For example, I also searched for discussions of interracial rape and dating. As it turned out, however, intermarriage was by far the most frequently discussed form of interracial intimacy.

The letters had an average length of 308 words (median: 248 words). The shortest letter was just 30 words long, while the longest one had 2,041 words. I coded the letters for any opinion related to interracial marriage. I read and coded each letter at least three times, most of them more often. After completing the coding process, I aggregated codes into groups.

4. The newspapers are available through the database for most of their publication history (see Table 1). The only major irregularity is that ProQuest dropped the *Chicago Defender* in 1975. This omission does not pose a serious problem for my analysis, since my overall results indicate that the intermarriage discourse had largely petered out by the mid '70s.

In order to ensure validity, I went through each instance of each code to ensure the code groups' internal consistency.

For this article, I removed the letters written by self-identified white writers ($n = 52$).⁵ Of course, racial identities in this context are entirely performative. I used writers' rhetorical cues (such as "We Negroes have to . . ." or "As a black woman, I . . .") to assign racial categories. Of the total sample of 429 letters, 93 did not contain conclusive cues about writers' racial categories. I decided to leave these letters in the sample, since the five newspapers explicitly catered to an African American readership. Therefore, readers' default assumption must have been that contributors were African American. As a second step, I removed those letters that did not include any normative evaluation of black-white interracial marriage ($n = 143$). Results in the following sections are based on the effective sample ($n = 234$), although my interpretations are informed by the analysis of the entire set.

The share of letters removed from the sample by excluding nonnormative letters is large, but it has to be remembered that my initial search cast a wide net and included any letter that contained any of the search terms in any context whatsoever. Some of these letters simply constitute false positives. Others allude to interracial intimacy merely in passing. For instance, on March 10, 1951, one writer in the *Chicago Defender* discusses President Truman's record on civil rights and concludes: "President Truman is no more for civil rights than Governor Wright is for mixed marriages in Mississippi." The writer invokes mixed marriages to compare Truman to Wright and thereby deride the former. Additionally, a relatively large number of excluded letters (45 of 143) comment on various forms of white hypocrisy. Writers in case point out that Southern white men rape black women and frequent black prostitutes, while publicly decrying the dangers of "race mixing" and lynching black men over questionable accusations of interracial rape. A typical example appears in the *Pittsburgh Courier* on May 21, 1932: "Even though the white man of the United States mates freely or by force with women of other races, he resents and lynches colored people who play Romeo with the white women. Is that fair?" Such letters certainly advocate for social justice, but they do not make an argument about intermarriage or even the general morality of interracial intimacy.

Analysis

I proceed with the analysis in four steps. In the first section, in order to provide an overview I describe the sample in terms of its temporal, regional, and gender distribution. In the second and third sections, I analyze the rhetorical strategies that writers used to argue for and against interracial marriage and how those strategies promoted and contested certain conceptions of racial politics and racial identity. Finally, in the fourth section, I return to the discourse as a whole to discuss the features that make it a battleground of identity.

Structuring the analysis in this way implies that it makes sense to dichotomize the data set into letters for and against intermarriage. This is indeed the case. Out of the effective sample of 234 letters, only 13 writers fielded arguments for both positions without dismissing one of them outright. And 7 of those 13 letters still came down clearly in favor of one of the two fundamental positions. In fact, the discourse's polarization, indicated by the virtual absence of ambiguity, is one of the reasons why I refer to it as a battleground of identity.⁶

5. Most letters submitted by white writers fall into two categories. First, there is racist "hate mail," in which writers accused blacks of lusting after white women. Second, intermarried white writers occasionally related their troubles, such as their lack of acceptance by both white and African American society.

6. An anonymous reviewer suggested that the impression of discourse polarization might result from editors having selected the pithiest submissions. However, the newspapers published both very short and very long letters. Since many writers were granted the opportunity to discuss the issue at length, they could have expressed complex and more multifaceted opinions, but hardly any writers did so.

Historical, Regional, and Gender Distribution

Figure 1 depicts the sums of letters for and against interracial marriage per decade. The sample is relatively dense for the period between 1925 and 1965. Almost all letters from the '20s were published in 1925 or later. Conversely, almost all letters from the '60s had been published by 1965. Therefore, public interest by and large subsided before the Supreme Court's 1967 decision to overturn the remaining state anti-miscegenation laws. The newspapers continued to publish a moderate amount of relevant letters in the '70s. In the '80s and '90s, the discourse largely disappeared from the letter columns.

Overall, I classified 139 letters as against intermarriage, 89 for intermarriage, and 6 as ambivalent. Letters opposed to interracial marriage dominated the discourse in the '20s and '30s, but the share of favorable letters continued to grow until the '50s and made up more than half of the letters in the '40s and '50s. In the 1960s, oppositional letters again dominated the discourse. My data do not allow me to explain these trends, but they seem to broadly reflect established ideological patterns among African Americans, from early twentieth-century Garveyism to post-war optimism and the civil rights movement and, finally, the resurgence of black nationalism in the 1960s (Marx 1998; Omi and Winant 1986; Wilson 1973). However, it is important to point out that historically dominant positions remained contested. Throughout the decades, writers both promoted and criticized interracial marriage, no matter the dominant ideological position of the day.

Another important consideration is whether the positions writers took varied substantially by region, particularly between Southern and non-Southern black writers. Of the effective sample of 234 letters, 191 letters contained sufficient information to attribute at least the state of origin. Three letters were sent from abroad and 26 from the 11 states of the former Confederacy, the area I define as the South. The remaining 162 letters were sent from the rest of the United States. Southern writers were somewhat more opposed to intermarriage than non-Southern writers. About 75 percent of Southern blacks opposed intermarriage (20 of 26), as compared to 60 percent of non-Southern blacks (94 of 156). This finding points to modest differences between the attitudes of Northern and Southern writers, but perhaps the more important result is that relatively few Southern blacks participated in the newspapers' intermarriage discourse at all.

Finally, revealing the gendered nature of letters to the editor columns as a public space, 121 letters were written by men and only 69 letters by women—for the rest of the effective sample, no gender could be established. I found no historical trend in women's participation: in the '20s

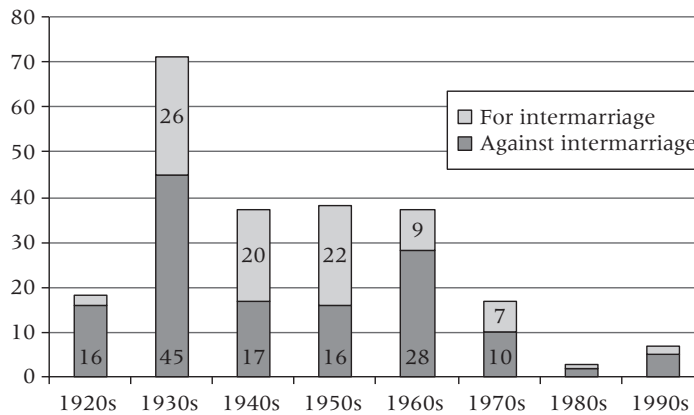


Figure 1 • Letters For and Against Intermarriage per Decade

as well as the 60s, for instance, women constituted a third of all writers. Overall, women were slightly more opposed to interracial marriage. A third of their letters advocated for interracial marriage, while 40 percent of men's letters did so.

Arguments against Inter-marriage

Opponents of interracial marriage supported their opinions with a wide range of arguments. Table 2 presents a typology of arguments that appeared in at least 15 letters. Frequency counts are based on unique occurrences, the number of letters in which at least one instance of at least one of the subcodes was found.

Bad Motives. Many writers opposing intermarriage supported their position by ascribing negative traits or motives to individuals who engaged in intermarriage. This code group represents the most frequent type of argument against intermarriage, both across decades and in total. Arguments in this group come in various forms, but all of them share one element: writers interpret the willingness to marry a white person as evidence of personal deficiency.

Chicago Defender, 05/03/1930: Only two classes of people believe in intermarriage, namely, people possessing less than one per cent of race pride, and people possessing less than one per cent of intelligence. Why cannot we be as proud of what we are as the other group? It is a coward who would like to don the uniform of the enemy and cross to the winning side.

This writer employs sarcasm ("less than one per cent of intelligence") and militaristic images to make his case: he speaks of "uniforms," "the enemy," and "the winning side." He creates a parallel between interracial marriage and deserting one's military unit. Race pride, by contrast, is semantically opposed to intermarriage. Consequently, once blacks acquire race pride, intermarriage will disappear. In terms of racial identity formation, such arguments support racial homogamy by ascribing negative motives or traits to the intermarried. They thereby heighten racial boundaries and laud homogamy as proof of positive individual traits.

Table 2 • Arguments against Inter-marriage

<i>Argument Type (number)</i>	<i>Subcodes</i>
Bad motives (65)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buys into race status system Contempt/lack of respect for black women Lack of loyalty Lack of race pride White fever
Development more important (38)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black ownership/economic development more important Education more important Equal opportunity/rights more important
Race is real (31)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black is beautiful Blacks and whites too different Destroys racial identity Genetic adulteration Racial genocide Ungodly/unchristian
Negative effects on the racial struggle (30)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases racial conflict/prejudice/disrespect Will divide races Will not resolve racial conflict Worsens the situation of blacks
Damages black family/gender system (24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Black men must control/protect black womanhood Blacks must form/support black families Deprives black women of spouses

Development More Important. The second most frequent argument against intermarriage stresses the significance of the main goals that writers feel African Americans should pursue. They argue that the struggle for socioeconomic equality is much more important than personal relationships. Some consider intermarriage inadvisable only for the time being, while most others, such as the following writer, demonstrate categorical opposition. The unifying feature of these utterances is the invocation of the larger racial struggle in relation to interracial marriage. The success of this struggle requires a united front. This argument emphasizes the responsibility of the individual toward the progress of the entire group; writers try to enforce a sense of unity and mutual commitment among African Americans.

New York Amsterdam News, 06/10/1961: How many colored NAACP secretaries and state heads have married white women? Where is the NAACP program for encouraging black businesses to start in black communities so that blacks will not have to look to white businessmen . . . Black men and women realize today that the only road to complete equality is black ownership of all businesses in their community like the Chinese have done in their communities . . . Instead of NAACP integration please give me the funds to start my own business.

Some writers, especially those writing before the 1950s, appear to believe in the possibility of upward mobility in the context of mainstream society. By contrast, this writer demands control and ownership over black communities in the tradition of black nationalism. Of course, black ownership and interracial marriage do not necessarily contradict each other. However, writers making this kind of argument think of intermarriage as the program of their ideological nemesis, integrationism. This writer refers to it as “NAACP integration.” He uses the symbol of intermarriage as shorthand for the perceived flaws of the integrationist movement.

Race is Real. This group of oppositional arguments comprises overtly essentialist descriptions of blackness. For instance, writers portray intermarriage as ungodly, a threat to racial identity, or even racial genocide. Some argue that blacks and whites are simply too different so that they should not marry each other. Independent of what a person’s motives may be for engaging in intermarriage, writers interpret intermarriage as destroying a real and valuable essence of race.

New York Amsterdam News, 11/28/1964: Do Americans really believe that a race can regain its loss [sic] heritage of freedom and self-esteem at the tail of another race’s kite? Segregation lynches the Negro minority psychologically and economically, while the siren song of integration enhances a sort of genocide, through miscegenation and loss of identity. As an alternative, Negroes can petition the U.S. and UN for adequate aid in securing appropriate land and a flag of our own.

Similar to the last letter, this example also illustrates the deep symbolic association between intermarriage and the politics of integration. While the last writer dismissively wrote of “NAACP integration,” this writer invokes Homer’s *Odyssey* and refers to the politics of integration as a “siren song”—enticing, but deadly. Integration here is equated with miscegenation and loss of identity, both of which cause “a sort of genocide.” As an alternative, the writer embraces a Garveyist program of black nationalism.

Negative Effects on the Racial Struggle. Some writers take a more pragmatic view. They argue that intermarriage is strategically harmful in a racist society. Most of these letters were published in the ’30s, as was the one below. In many ways, this argument is similar to the previously discussed argument that development is more important than intermarriage. However, the “development” argument focuses “inward,” on the imperative for African Americans to gain power as a group through education and business founding. The “negative effects” argument focuses “outward,” on how intermarriage affects race relations between whites and blacks.

Pittsburgh Courier, 08/24/1935: When a race man marries a white girl, it only incurs more hate and prejudice from the white race. We will never stop lynching or segregation until we learn to love and marry our

own girls . . . When white men find out that colored men do not want their women, there will be no more lynching in the USA.

Here and in other cases, writers state that intermarriage fans racial tensions, because intermarriage confirms white fears over integration and thus disrupts the process of racial emancipation. Writers particularly employed this argument when discussing prominent cases of interracial marriage, such as that of NAACP executive secretary Walter White to white journalist Poppy Cannon in 1949 (see Romano 2003). By itself, this argument does not rely on essentialist understandings of race, but writers nonetheless emphasize race as a category of social organization for strategic reasons.

Damages Black Family/Gender System. Authors in this category express the view that intermarriage threatens the black family, particularly the relationships between black men and black women. In the simplest form of this argument, writers reason that intermarriage deprives black women of spouses. Since black men intermarry more often than black women, the latter would then be left without spouses. Others propose that racial emancipation can be built only on the foundation of strong black families. Such letters often carry forceful messages about gender.

Chicago Defender, 08/05/1971: For years the colored woman worked hard and long. She worked at home with one hand and outside with the other. She washed clothes by hand, swept floors, cut up chickens, dusted furniture, etc. Now matters are better? She has more pay and less strain? She has a reward? The County Marriage License Bureau says there is a sharp increase in interracial marriages and they are largely colored men and white women!

In this case, the male writer portrays black women as diligent in their fulfillment of their "role" as homemakers. In order to emphasize the cohesiveness of black women in this regard, the writer uses a rhetorical strategy of singularization: he speaks of "the colored woman" rather than "colored women." The writer insinuates that the appropriate reward for black women's labor would be black husbands. Some black men, however, do not live up to the demands of their gender, instead marrying white women. A typical implication for racial identity formation in these cases is that writers promote an isolated black gender system with mutually oriented gender roles. According to these letters, black women need male support and protection, which, in the end, they can only receive from black men.

Arguments for Intermarriage

I now turn to the arguments that writers made in defense of intermarriage. Table 3 provides an overview.

Libertarianism. Many writers making libertarian arguments call for the abolition of anti-miscegenation laws. In the context of the civil rights movement, activists fought all laws relegating blacks to second-class citizenship, including anti-miscegenation laws. Consequently, this is a quintessential civil rights argument. In the period between 1945 and 1967, the number of states prohibiting interracial marriage shrunk from 30 to 16 (Wallenstein 2002). In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court declared all remaining anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional (Wallenstein 2002). Indeed, this code group represents the most frequent pro-intermarriage argument in the '40s, '50s, and '60s. Nonetheless, rather than exclusively focusing on anti-miscegenation laws, many writers in this category also criticize black opposition towards interracial marriage. The following writer had begun his letter by framing it as a response to a previous discussion in the *Amsterdam News's* letter columns about the politics of interracial marriage. He then described racism in his Ohio town.

New York Amsterdam News, 11/30/1946: How can we in this community clear up this situation if people in your part of the country fight it. The Constitution gives every man and woman the right to love and

Table 3 • Arguments for Inter-marriage

<i>Argument Type (number)</i>	<i>Subcodes</i>
Libertarianism (45)	Inter-marriage a personal affair Inter-marriage a personal right Leave interracial couples alone
Good motives (34)	Dignified Emancipated/courageous/well deliberated True love
Positive effects on the racial struggle (17)	Creates interracial understanding/reduces prejudice Social progress Will solve race problem
Race is not real (16)	No such thing as race purity One human race

marry anyone they wish. And if that good Jesus that they all pray to would let a little wisdom out of the bag, maybe people would let other people live their own lives in peace and happiness. If we are all God's children, why can't we marry whom we please without being meddled with.

The author points out the perceived detrimental effects of black opposition to inter-marriage. Invoking the Constitution, his second sentence then makes a clear case for the right to interracial marriage. However, the author goes further, calling for a right of privacy: inter-married couples should be able to "live their own lives in peace and happiness." The writer thereby questions the right of others—including the black critics of inter-marriage—to interfere or judge. As racial identity formation projects, such arguments support modern individualism and universalism. Endorsements of libertarianism deemphasize race as a criterion of social organization and thereby the basis of separatist politics. Additionally, many writers in this category combine libertarian arguments with more ambitious claims about black progress.

New York Amsterdam News, 01/24/1948: I believe when two people love each other that is all that matters, be they Jew, Negro, or the member of any other race. The reader who signed herself as "A Negro Woman," stated if we keep up the inter-marriage talk, we will have another bigger and bloodier war in the U.S. I disagree with her, for inter-marriage will bring inter-racial understanding between the races.

Like the previous author, this writer also explicitly addresses black critics of inter-marriage. He invokes a letter written by "A Negro Woman" to refute her argument that inter-marriage would adversely affect African Americans. He combines his libertarian argument with assertions about the positive effects of inter-marriage on race relations (see "positive effects on the racial struggle").

Good Motives. Complementary to the negative ascriptions of motive I described earlier, writers in favor of inter-marriage also negotiated the intentions behind inter-marriage, assigning positive traits or motives to interracial couples. This type of argument is particularly prevalent from the '30s to the early '50s. Specifically, writers argue that individuals demonstrate courage and dignity in "following their hearts" across racial boundaries. Further, they invoke love as a normative force that we must obey. Not only can we marry across race, we should do so—if this is where our "true love" is to be found.

Chicago Defender, 10/21/1950: [P]eople are people and one of the greatest things in our life is love. And if one has to thwart his love because some bigoted people don't believe in marriage between whites and Negroes, then the true meaning of honest love is lost.

Although this argument is individualistic, rooted in self-actualization and emotional fulfillment, it has political implications. The argument represents an appeal to a value (love) that trumps other commitments, such as group-based loyalties. Related utterances often claim that humans are essentially equal, because love surmounts all differences between them. In the statement above,

the author explicitly makes this claim: “people are people.” Thus, as identity formation projects, “good motives” letters undermine essentialist understandings of race.

Race is Not Real. Writers employing this type of argument question the essence of race. As such, these letters also constitute explicit identity formation projects. They refute any opposition to intermarriage on the basis of “racial purity” or “racial difference.” Writers in this group regularly address theories and assumptions that opponents of intermarriage may endorse.

Pittsburgh Courier, 07/07/1934: [O]rchids of congratulation to [a journalist] for writing, and the *Courier* for publishing that item in defense of white women who have the social courage to associate with colored men. Certainly, as you indignantly say, they should not be regarded as prostitutes, by either race . . . [A]s every anthropologist above the mental level of a Ku Klux mucker knows, the “theory” of a “pure” race is nonsense; we’re all mongrels—thank heaven for it. Any other system of breeding ends in degeneracy.

The author invokes the authority of science (anthropology and, implicitly, biology) in making his argument. Anthropology has established that there is no such thing as “pure” race. Without intermarriage, human reproduction would lead to “degeneracy.” Interestingly, this type of argument disappeared after the 1950s, while its opposite, the “race is real” argument, continued to be made.

Positive Effects on the Racial Struggle. Some writers believe that intermarriage itself can be a force of racial emancipation. This is the most enthusiastic and politically ambitious argument in support of intermarriage. Such letters exhibit a strong sense of optimism about a better future, in which interracial love will eventually destroy the color line. For example, authors may claim that intermarriage furthers interracial understanding. Few such letters were published after 1950.

Chicago Defender, 10/21/1950: [T]alking, mingling, and marrying one another is the only way to put an end to discrimination and segregation . . . We should stop and think more often of the daily hell these people go through. Rather than being condemned by colored people, they should be hailed as courageous pioneers blazing the trail into a new and much better world.

According to this author, interracial marriage and other strategies of integration (talking and mingling) are “the only way” to end discrimination. Therefore, intermarriage is not only justifiable, it represents a positive political act. Note that this letter also constitutes an instance of the “good motives” code group: the writer valorizes intermarried couples as “courageous pioneers” that go through “daily hell.” Comparing this letter with the example for the code group “bad motives,” it becomes clear just how differently writers perceive interracial couples. Where some see “courageous pioneers,” others see “coward[s] who . . . cross to the winning side.”

A Battleground of Identity

In the previous sections, I introduced the elements of the intermarriage discourse, the arguments that individual writers made in relation to interracial marriage. The analysis has illustrated the broad range of rhetorical strategies that writers used and how those strategies tied interracial marriage to conceptions of racial identity and politics. Now I investigate how these elements combine to form one battleground of identity.

Many of the letters quoted in this article explicitly addressed their ideological opponents. Consequently, these authors wrote their letters in full awareness of their argument’s position in this discourse, as well as in anticipation of potential objections. In other words, the discourse represented a contested field of political communication. Certainly, many writers did not use keywords that identified themselves and their opponents as full-fledged members of political movements (such as “NAACP,” “integrationism,” “Garvey,” or “nationalism”). Nonetheless, their ideological positions became clear through the visions of race and racial politics they endorsed in their letters.

Not all writers in favor of intermarriage questioned the reality of race, but all of them attacked the rigidity of racial boundaries and thereby, for the purpose of their letters, became integrationists. Whether going so far as to claim that intermarriage would overthrow the current system of race relations or simply calling for the right to intermarry, all of the pro-intermarriage authors hoped to reduce the salience of race as a category of social organization. They envisioned a more fluid society in which race would become a less important social boundary. Conversely, not all oppositional writers essentialized race—although many of them did—but all propagated the significance of racial exclusivity. Consequently, their letters constituted a spectrum of separatist racial formation projects. This, again, was true for the entire range of utterances: from the pragmatic argument that intermarriage was politically counterproductive to the charge that it amounted to racial genocide.

The claims-making rhetoric linking intermarriage with competing conceptions of race and racial politics remained implicit in some letters, but many writers explicitly discussed how they believed them to relate to each other (Best 1987). It is plausible to conclude that most writers were well aware of the debate's far-reaching political implications. Authors did not merely employ heated rhetoric by chance. Emotions ran high because they knew that more was at stake, that intermarriage represented a larger social conflict (Voloshinov 1986). And because of the symbol's rich implications for politics and identity, neither side could forfeit the issue; it would have meant giving up the essence of what integrationism and separatism stood for. This is why I call the intermarriage discourse a battleground of identity.

Recalling the two typologies (see Tables 2 and 3), it is stunning to consider how much this issue became politicized. Writers made arguments on four levels. Note that most arguments on both sides directly correspond to each other. First, writers negotiated whether there really is anything "interracial" about interracial marriage. If race is not a real category, as some integrationists argued, then any marriage is just a marriage. "Interracial" marriages would help to reveal this fact and, by putting it in plain sight, demystify race. Therefore, "interracial" marriage was a viable political strategy to them. Conversely, separatists argued that intermarriage is inherently bad, because it destroys a real and valuable heritage. Intermarriage would thus weaken African Americans.

Second, on the level of the individual, writers engaged in motive mongering (Mills 1940). What, they asked, does the intent to marry across racial boundaries reveal about a person? Separatists reasoned that only despicable motives or traits could lead a person to do so. To them, intermarriage signified cowardice and a lack of race pride. By contrast, integrationists spoke of love and the courage to transcend artificial racial boundaries. These attributions of motive create opposing visions of what it means to be a racially emancipated African American.

Third, writers contested the effects of interracial marriage for African Americans as a group. Would it improve or worsen their situation? Separatist writers argued that intermarriage would worsen or, at the very least, certainly not improve the social standing of African Americans. They also argued that strong black families provided the foundation of the black struggle and that intermarriage would damage this foundation—another effects-based argument. Integrationists believed in the positive effects of intermarriage on race relations.

Finally, integrationists also advanced an argument on the level of universalist social values. Very much in consistency with the American Creed, libertarian writers appealed to the rights of freedom and privacy that should equally apply to all citizens (Lipset 1996). This appears to be the only major argument that engages the issue of intermarriage without larger claims about race and racial politics. However, most libertarian writers still positioned themselves in this polarized discourse. First, many libertarian writers explicitly addressed black opponents of intermarriage. Second, many writers making libertarian arguments *also* made political arguments about the positive effects of interracial marriage for African Americans. Finally, even strictly libertarian utterances undermine separatist politics, because libertarianism emphasizes the individual over the group and deemphasizes race as a category of social organization.

Discussion

Over the preceding sections, I have demonstrated the substantial politicization of interracial marriage. The high level of politicization reveals that, for many writers, this debate was not so much about actual intermarried couples. Instead, the issue provided a stage to discuss larger questions of racial identity and political progress. The letters to the editor represented racial projects, efforts to change or reinterpret and revalue racial boundaries. All of the arguments I found served to heighten or deconstruct social boundaries between whites and blacks and thus to promote and undermine various conceptions of racial identity.

In their letters, separatist writers used the issue of intermarriage to promote a sense of unity and cohesion among African Americans, what Rogers Brubaker (2004) has called “groupness.” They drew and enforced moral boundaries by deriding intermarried individuals. They pointed to the shared social struggle and individuals’ responsibilities to support it. And they affirmed the real and valuable essence of race. They did so because they believed that racial progress could only be achieved by keeping whites at arm’s length. Integrationist writers, by contrast, wanted to reduce the salience of race as a social category. They questioned the validity of racial categories and argued that intermarriage would reduce prejudice. They believed that meaningful integration was the best way to improve the situation of African Americans.

Finding this discourse in the letter columns of black newspapers implies that racial identity formation is not the sole domain of elites. Black newspapers provided an important public forum that allowed for inclusive debate (Burma 1947; Myrdal 1944; Washburn 2006). Major studies in racial identity formation have traced historical changes in identity through the interactions of intellectuals, movement leaders, and the state (Marx 1998; Omi and Winant 1986). Of course, elites and powerful institutions play crucial roles for the formation of racial identity. However, scholars of race should also investigate how wider sets of individuals learn about, interpret, and further disseminate racial identities. The newspapers’ letter columns offered one site for doing so.

Studying popular processes of racial identity formation represents an important task for future research. In this article, I have focused on only one site of discourse, letters to the editor columns. Therefore, my sample is not without limitations. As previously mentioned, writers from the South and women were underrepresented in the sample. Furthermore, editorial decisions may have influenced the set of opinions that were published in the letter columns. Future research should examine additional actors, types of utterances, and discursive sites. How did other actors, such as black journalists and editors influence this discourse? What other types of utterances—such as diaries, editorials, or even pieces of art—might allow us to trace these changing racial identities (for a methodological framework, see Bakhtin 1986; Voloshinov 1986)? Finally, what other discourses might galvanize conflict between integrationist and separatist ideas (see Binder 1999 for another example)? Tackling these questions will help in further bridging the gap between individual identities and large-scale racial transformations (Saperstein et al. 2013).

I now further discuss and develop the concept of identity battlegrounds. I have developed this concept in relation to a racial discourse, but I argue that it can be fruitfully applied to other contested discourses. The concept helps to understand why some issues are more likely to produce sustained and intense ideological conflict than others. Often, conflict between opposing movements, such as integrationism and separatism, could crystallize around a wide range of issues. How does conflict become organized particularly around a specific issue, such as abortion in the conflict between conservatives and women’s rights groups? In order to illustrate the potential for wider applicability, I conclude by analytically elaborating the concept through a comparison of the intermarriage discourse with the debate over abortion (e.g., Ferree et al. 2002; Halfmann 2011; McCaffrey and Keys 2000).

First and foremost, in order to become heavily contested an issue has to be of substantial political interest to at least two opposing movements. If two or more parties consider a symbol significant for their ideological conflict, they have clear incentives to define it in their favor

(Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Williams 1995). I have shown that intermarriage was perceived as a symbol of integration itself, because it signifies a virtual endpoint of integration. Its symbolic implications made it a potential site of ideological contention for integrationists and separatists. Many parties have a stake in the abortion debate, but the issue has become the central site of conflict for women's rights and conservative "family values" groups (McCaffrey and Keys 2000; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Women's rights activists consider abortion rights the sine qua non of a woman's right to control her own body. For their conservative opponents, abortion rights signify the eclipse of the traditional family and the triumph of individualism over a moral society. It is hard to envision how these parties could forge a compromise without surrendering the very essence of their identities—what it means to be an advocate of women's rights or family values.

The provision of strong "warrants" is a second feature of identity battlegrounds. Warrants are the often-implicit things we need to care about to find a claim important (Best 1987). They represent the emotional potential a debate can draw from: the stronger the warrants, the more heated the debate (Best 1987). Therefore, controversies that revolve around widely accepted warrants are more likely to stir up substantial debate. Intermarriage invokes sexual intimacy and children, issues important to most people. The abortion discourse also relies on strong warrants: sexuality, children, the family, religion, and individual rights.

A final feature of identity battlegrounds is their conceptual tangibility. Concrete topics work better than abstract ones, because they are more accessible. It is easier to form an opinion and make an argument about concrete subjects. Thus, concrete subjects promote inclusive participation and reception. I have shown that intermarriage represents a concrete topic with abstract implications. The same applies to abortion. Since it is concrete and easily imagined, the subject is inclusive, but it nonetheless poses abstract questions with far-reaching implications. Is human life sacred? When does human life begin? Do individuals or families constitute the basic unit of society? Any (normative) opinion on abortion inevitably weighs in on some or all of these questions.

Therefore, I suggest that battlegrounds of identity are likely to emerge around emotionally charged and concrete symbols that at least two opposing movements consider vital to their political identity. They must be symbols that none of the movements can cease to compete over without surrendering their political essence. Future studies should test these claims and further refine the battleground concept by investigating additional contested discourses.

Because battlegrounds of identity exhibit a high degree of polarization, it is unlikely that they should yield compromise or even consensus—unless one side of the debate essentially "dies out." I found that, at least in the letter columns, the intermarriage discourse subsided in the mid-'60s, a time when separatist utterances dominated the discourse. It does not follow from my data why the debate ended at this particular point in time, even before the Supreme Court ruled anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional in 1967. It may have ended, because it had become increasingly apparent that integrationism had won its key victories without quickly improving the social situation of most African Americans (Killian 1990; Wilson 1978). Consequently, integrationism as a political ideology may have lost its vitality. As long as the debate continues, however, identity battlegrounds may do more to obfuscate than to support the creation of consensus. Polarized as such discourses are, they constitute quite the opposite of Jürgen Habermas's (1984) ideal speech environment in which the better argument eventually prevails.

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