‘A Little Bit Married’ while Black:
A Personal and Political Meditation on
Marriage, Single Adulthood and Relationship Literacy

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Marriage Equality and Socially Stigmatized Relationships: Intersections

1 The 2015 Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* affirmed the equal right of all citizens to marry. However, in the wake of subsequent events such as the Orlando massacre, the election of socially conservative legislative majorities in Washington and in state capitals, and the elevation of a high-profile opponent of marriage equality to the vice presidency (Mike Pence), it becomes clearer that the 5-4 decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* established a legal framework for ending discrimination in marriage law, but culturally contested questions as to what marriage means remain to be grappled with in many other contexts. This includes attitudinal gaps in the acceptance of marriage equality within public opinion after the 2016 election. Among so-called “values voters” – white religious conservatives that tend to oppose marriage equality – a preference was expressed for Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton by a margin of 81% to 16%, a higher margin than that of Mitt Romney, John McCain, or George W. Bush over their socially more liberal opponents (Smith and Martinez). Gaps in acceptance of same-sex marriage in the 2010s by age, region, religion, and other factors echo the measurable but uneven shifts in public acceptance of interracial marriages after the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case, and it is noted that fifty years after that decision, racial homogeny “is still the norm for intimate relationships today” (Toledo 775). These findings remind us that while a landmark court case may remove legal prohibitions, such legal changes do not “eradicate the forces motivating those barriers” (Toledo 772). Those forces include stereotyping, social shaming, and institutional discrimination that stigmatize relationships which appear to fall outside of heteronormative frameworks.

2 In this context, *Obergefell v. Hodges* offers an opportunity for advocacy, caring connections, and relationship education to inspire wider public acceptance of marriage equality and to deepen our awareness of a spectrum of relationships that are frequently stigmatized or ignored in a heterosexist context. Recent literature within the interdisciplinary field of family

studies indicates a strong research interest in relationship outcomes among sexually and racially marginalized groups, and findings from this literature should be synthesized and integrated into emerging models for relationship education and public awareness. In addition to examining marriage and heteronormativity, education and awareness models should also examine the cultural significance of singlehood, a relationship status that is under-acknowledged and undervalued as a social experience. As an uncertain and contentious era of legal marriage equality begins, only about 56% of US adults over 18 are married, compared to 72% in 1960 (Morello), meaning that nearly half of the adult population is divorced, widowed, or never married. With a divorce rate that amounts to nearly half of the annual marriage rate (6.9 marriages per 1,000 adults annually, 3.2 divorces per 1,000 adults), singlehood occurs and recurs across all demographics and throughout the life span (National Center for Health Statistics).

3 This essay offers definitions and analysis of several concepts that are useful for responding empathically to a spectrum of relationships, including singlehood, with its nuances and variations resulting from choice and/or circumstance. I posit that much of our relationship experience is contained within social circles which welcome people with a similar relationship status, while those with a different status are frequently regarded with suspicion or exclusion. The *Obergefell v. Hodges* case is notable for its widening of a revered social circle, the institution of marriage itself, affirming that marriage bonds among same-sex partners carry the same legal weight as heterosexual marriages. An enriched relationship literacy is an attainable next step for recognizing and resisting the effects of social stigma and supporting health and fulfillment in all consensual relationships.

4 In its effort to map a set of concepts and common understandings for improving relationship literacy, this essay uses unconventional analytic and disciplinary tools. These tools include personal perspectives as a Black heterosexual male and as a humanities scholar who values the clarity of measurement offered by social science data on romantic relationships, but who also contends that empirical approaches are not sufficient for a full understanding of the impact of social stigma in non-normative relationships. Thus, the tools of narrative, cultural history, and self-disclosure complement the discussion of empirical findings, giving shape and voice to key premises explored in family studies research. My racial identity (Black), family identities (formerly single parent, now blended family), and my relationship status (formerly single, now married) are probed to identify larger truths about relationships – ways that statuses

intersect, how they are stigmatized, and how they might be valued if a deeper awareness of relationship variety were to emerge. Awareness of stigmatized relationships in the era of *Obergefell v. Hodges* provides an important step towards a more inclusive public discourse about relationships.

5 Black racial identity is central to this essay's personal and political discussion of marriage and the stigmatizing of relationships that are perceived as non-normative. Historically in the U.S., Black families have been subject to public hostility and racial stereotyping in many contexts. The social history of slavery, Jim Crow, miscegenation laws, and mass incarceration has left in place commonly held stereotypes about Black women and men – Black women as unfeminine and unfit as mothers (Kim 40), and Black men as "inherently animalistic, and therefore resistant to 'civilized' institutions like marriage" (Kim 58). This legacy of racial discrimination, undergirded by white supremacy, is evoked and politicized in social contexts such as the publication of Moynihan Report (*The Negro Family: the Case for National* Action) in 1965, a report which contended memorably that the "the breakdown of the Negro family has led to a startling increase in welfare dependency" (Moynihan). Criticisms of single parent families headed by Black women were further articulated in conservative political admonishment of "welfare queens" in the 1970s and 1980s, and in racial panics regarding "crack mothers" in the 1980s. Political race-baiting of this kind energized Ronald Reagan's voting base in the 1976 and 1980 elections and contributed to Bill Clinton's successful push for welfare reform, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which narrowed and limited the ways that financially challenged families could qualify for direct support (Editorial Board). In the wake of these developments, open hostility and heightened scrutiny has been evident in public conversations about Black family life, along with an unwillingness to consider public action in response to economic and social pressures on Black single parents.

6 Challenging the public disparagement of a relationship demographic must be done persistently if attitudes are to shift. Even in recent family studies research, marriage is often described as "deinstitutionalized" within African American/Black cultural contexts, a rather editorialized way to describe a demographic trend (NewsOne). Feminist scholar Joan Morgan describes these declining marriage rates among Black families with empathy, as a potential loss of black-on-black love that has endured through slavery, discrimination, de-industrialization, and other social traumas (Morgan 71). I would extend Morgan's argument by contending that an

improved relationship literacy should include more empathic, contextually situated, and intersectional understandings of Black family life; such discussions would help clarify how historical trauma and social stigmatizing of non-normative relationships can increase the risk of negative outcomes for marginalized individuals.

7 Across most U.S. communities of color, disproportionately smaller percentages of marriage partners report being "very happy" in their marriages (Fincham and Beach 637). These data findings have implications for both relationship education and individual life journeys, especially since within communities of color, many relationship options are subject to heightened social stigma due to the perception of non-normativity: bi-racial marriage, cohabitation, and single-parent households, all relationship forms that can include persons of any gender. If we are to build on the affirmative foundation built by *Obergefell v. Hodges* and support the dignity and worth of all loving relationships, it is crucial that we expand our conceptual vocabulary, recall our awareness of intersectionality, and activate our empathy and support of all consensual relationships. In practice, relationship education and other awareness efforts should help us to contextualize the relationship journeys of individual people, leaving us better positioned to respond with care and concern to the stigmas that people may experience in their intimate partnerships.

Love Languages: Six Concepts for Relationship Literacy

8 To respond to relationship variety in the current context with care, concern, and positive engagement, a shared conceptual vocabulary for describing relationship variety is required that highlights key findings in family studies literature and acknowledges demographic trends. The six concepts I list below also inform the narrative developed in this essay and contributes to a common story of love amid social change. These concepts include: *Standard North American Family* (SNAF); *heterosexism*, *singlism*; *Drive to Marry* (DTM); *Multi-Partner Fertility* (MPF); and *a Little Bit Married* (ALBM).

9 Concept 1 - *Standard North American Family* (SNAF) is used commonly to describe a family structure in which married opposite-sex partners live full-time with biological children, and the husband is the primary wage earner. About 20% of married couples with children have such a structure today (Cohn), which reflects social changes impacting families over the last fifty years: increased workforce participation among women, affirmation of equal marriage rights, no-

fault divorce, wider acknowledgement of human variety in sexual orientation, and the ubiquity of single parenthood by choice or circumstance. Arguably, the term *standard* within this concept of *SNAF* is misleading.

10 Concept 2, *heterosexism,* along with a related term, *heterosexual imaginary,* further highlight the cultural biases that underlie into the concept of *Standard North American Family*. Ingraham and Saunders define *heterosexual imaginary* as "ways of thinking that conceal how heterosexuality structures gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an institution" (Ingraham and Saunders). *Heterosexism* refers more specifically to the discriminatory consequences of a social system that normalizes heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage as the highest order conditions for a flourishing relationship. Assessing cultural attitudes toward marriage that predominated before the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, Ramona Faith Oswald has observed that "our society privileges heterosexual marriage, and thus weddings…link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious benefits" (349-350). Oswald observes further that "the union of one man and one woman is bolstered by defining [LGBTQA] people as a threat to family" (350). Even in the wake of *Obergefell v. Hodges* and majority public support for marriage equality, a wide swath of public opinion still holds that marriage should be available only to heterosexual couples. Public officials in North Dakota, Texas, Kansas, and other states have sought to legitimize religious objections to serving to same-sex couples, meaning that same-sex couples would not be served equitably by the state in the issuing of marriage licenses (Gambino) or by wedding-related businesses (Fitzgerald).

11 In in her research on heterosexism, Oswald has studied participant reactions to wedding rituals such as the tossing of the bouquet and garter, a common tradition in heterosexual weddings. Interviews with heterosexual and LGBTQA wedding attendees discuss the human impact of heterosexism during these rituals:

> Participants understood catching the bouquet to be a time when unmarried females unite around the possibility of heterosexual marriage for all women, and compete with each other to be next. Where the bouquet ritual symbolized the importance of marriage for women, the garter ritual was understood to symbolize male bonding over the sexual domination of women within marriage. The values underlying these rituals were in conflict with the values held by GLBT family members. Participants described the bouquet ritual as silly, but were 'repulsed by the whole idea of degrading this woman who just got married…the garter is not fun, it's angering. It's like, you're marrying her

> so now you're going to show the other men her leg? This brings us right back to the ownership of women (359).

Despite their awareness of sexism directed at women and heterosexism infusing the entire ritual, LGBTQA wedding attendees often participated half-heartedly and with irony in the bouquet and garter toss. Oswald describes single lesbian participants who respond to the ritual as follows: "'Every once in a while I'll get in there and try to catch the bouquet, which is like a brilliant joke amongst all my friends'" (360). Interviewees consistently speak of an intense pressure to participate, with "heterosexual guests treating them as if they were single men and women who desired heterosexual marriage," even when their same-sex partners were present at the reception (360). In these ways, marriage remains a pivotal event for many heterosexual couples and, potentially, an exercise in heterosexism for same-sex partners who attend these ceremonies.

12 Concept 3, *singlism*, describes social pressures and negative judgments directed at unmarried people because of their relationship status. In an article titled "I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me," Sharp and Ganong interview focus groups of single heterosexual women, concluding that social shaming of single people continues even though "Americans now spend more years of their adult life unmarried than married" (957). Sharp and Ganong define singlism as

> a pervasive ideology of marriage and family, manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies that favor couples over singles [including] the unquestioned belief that everyone wants to (and will) get married…that a romantic, sexual partnership is the only way to achieve intimacy, and thus, individuals who have a partner are happier, more adjusted, and lead more fulfilling lives than do single people (957).

Interestingly, while major medical studies highlight the health benefits of heterosexual marriage, other findings suggest that in marriage in early adulthood is linked to earlier mortality in later years. Research also highlights stress-related health risks connected to divorce, but those risks tend to lessen over time, along with a significant number of divorced people who experience positive outcomes even over the short term (Perrig-Chiello, Hutchinson, and Morselli 398). These findings challenge singlism by questioning the cultural assumption that marriage is always and undoubtedly the healthiest relationship option for adult life.

13 Concept 4, *Drive to Marry* (DTM), helps explain motivations to marry or stay single that are culturally constructed and individually internalized. Researchers have measured DTM

strength and individual motivations among demographic segments of the population. For heterosexual men, DTM is often focused around the desire to be a parent:

> For men, wanting to become fathers is an especially compelling reason…to marry, whereas for women, it is an important reason, but only one of many. Because women bear children, and because they often have custody of them following the breakup of a relationship, it is logical that men would benefit from the close availability of a partner with whom they may share parenthood. Thus, it may be especially evident to young men who want to be fathers that they will have a greater opportunity to actively engage in this role if they get married (Blakemore 331).

14 As we think empathically about parenting and marriage choices, it is well worth considering how economic realities may influence DTM. One study concluded that African American men with a strong traditional work ethic and desire for self-reliance took on extra jobs, up to four jobs, to preserve a middle-class lifestyle. Also, compared to white couples, African American men (and women) tended to imagine a higher level of happiness outside of marriage, and expected that "their standard of living would suffer less with the absence of their spouse" (Dixon 26-46). These findings run counter to a common cultural assumption that a low DTM is a pathology to be overcome as opposed to a preference that is broadly distributed across populations, reflecting cultural differences as well.

15 Concept 5, *multi-partner fertility* (MPF) is a sociological term referencing parents who have children with more than one biological mother or father. The language used to describe these parent-child relationships is sometimes derogatory, especially when children are born outside of marriage; some vernacular terms such as *baby momma*, *baby daddy*, *love child*, and even the sexist and racist term *welfare mother* remain in common usage. At present, approximately 28% of women with two or more children have children by different fathers, suggesting that MPF is common among contemporary families (Wiltz).

16 The relevant literature on MPF describes its broad distribution among U.S. populations and highlights complexities and risks that may need to be negotiated in these family contexts. For fathers in these contexts, a possibility exists that with multiple families to support, "these men sometimes limit their financial support of their previous children or stop spending as much time with them," essentially swapping families (Wiltz). Additionally, when there is a range of parent-child relationships within a single household, challenges of many kinds may arise – increased health risks for mothers (Wiltz), potentially rocky relationships with ex-partners to navigate, and, among more than 30% of U.S. residents who have at least one step- or half-sibling

(Ashbrook), a period of two to five years to "bond and figure out new relationships" in a household setting (Robinson). A 21st century relationship literacy requires us to be aware of relationship and household transitions in family life.

17 The study of MPF also has implications for racial identity formation. While interracial relationships and families are less common than similar relationships within a single race, the number of these relationships has been steadily increasing since the 1960s. Some reduction in the social stigma attached to these relationships can be seen in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court case prohibiting miscegenation laws, and media narratives that treat interracial relationships more empathically (Lienemann and Stopp E411), but the persistence of stigma is reported widely in family studies literature. Adolescent partners in interracial relationships are less likely to tell family and friends about their relationships. Interracial partners are less likely to bridge between cohabitation and marriage, and such partners may experience reduced relationship satisfaction when children are present within the family arrangement. Interracial partners must also negotiate a "racial stratification hierarchy," with regionally specific and frequently judgmental responses to particular racial group couplings (Herman and Campbell 345-346). In sum, despite a demonstrable trend toward greater acceptance of interracial relationships, social stigmatizing of such relationships persists.

18 Concept 6, *a Little Bit Married* (ALBM), describes a continuum of relationships that are monogamous, non-matrimonial, and enduring for at least 12 months. There may be parallels between ALBM and marriage: "Maybe you and your [partner] have lived together long enough to reach what many states would deem a legitimate common law marriage" (Seligson 13) or there may be children in common, pets in common, even extended families in common. Many of the 44% of US adults who are living single have these relationships, some of which last longer than typical marriages. Hannah Seligson, who coined the phrase *a little bit married*, is a strong advocate of lifelong relationship education.

An Individual Relationship Journey– the Political Becomes Personal

19 Self-education through reading family studies literature has deepened my understanding of several aspects of my personal relationship journey: growing up in a single parent household that was living near the poverty line, followed by a long period of adult singlehood, and finally, marriage and a blended, multiracial family. During this journey, however, I was mostly unaware

of how my experience connected with larger relationship trends, even as I experienced some forms of social sigma due to relationship choices, the ongoing hazards of anti-black racism, and the conservative culture war rhetoric of the post-Civil Rights era. Self-education has clarified connections between personal experiences and trends such as the de-coupling of marriage and parenthood in the contemporary U.S., with 41% of children being born to single parents (Hayford, Guzzon, and Smock 521), including my first child. The timing of my nuptial would also echo a significant national trend: in 2013, a record number of 12% of newlyweds married outside of their racial identity group (Wang).

20 Some of the current threads in family research literature can be retrospectively applied to the early years in my single life, including the very moment when I first brought someone home to meet Mom as a college sophomore. My sweetie's name was Lisa[1] – a tall blonde farm girl from Grand Island, Nebraska. I mean *farm girl* literally, not just as metaphor. Lisa was the eldest daughter of an upper middle class white family with a veterinarian for a father and a homemaker for a mother. I was a city boy from a Black family of modest means – raised by a single mother who had worked many years in domestic service while taking every opportunity she could find to self-educate through independent reading and workforce development programs. On Thanksgiving weekend, 1981, Lisa and I rode the bus from Iowa City, Iowa to Omaha. During a lay-over we walked downtown for window shopping and stayed too long – she missed the last Grand Island-bound bus. So, with no other options, we went home to meet Mom.

21 As the youngest child of the family and a high scholastic achiever, I was no stranger to high expectations, whether these expectations were spoken or unspoken. I knew that the proper way to handle my business didn't include unplanned overnight visits from young white women. Through the distancing of time and research-based perspectives, I can now say that the challenges faced by a black-white couple such as Lisa and I included a high potential for excessive public visibility and family disapproval, conditions which can "disconfirm and invalidate" the romantic relationship (Bell and Hastings 768). If we had been a longer-term couple, we would likely experience additional social stigma due to enduring social disapproval of interracial couples, particularly at the time when we dated (1981), less than fifteen years after the landmark *Loving vs. Virginia* case declared miscegenation laws unconstitutional. In that context, Lisa and I would likely have experienced forms of social stigma that are described as "a

[1] For privacy, the name and hometown have been changed.

chronic source of psychological stress" and a risk factor for negative health outcomes, especially for members of a socially marginalized population (Hatzenbuehler et al.). These stressors include the following:

> stigma or expectations of rejection, experiences of discrimination (both acute events and chronic everyday mistreatment), internalization of negative social beliefs about one's social groups or social identity, and stressors related to the concealment or management of a stigmatized identity (LeBlanc, Frost, and White).

22 In response to her son's interracial relationship (and without the benefit of inclusive relationship education), my mother's actions embodied a high degree of care, concern, and racial tolerance. Her hometown, Forrest City, Arkansas, is named after Nathaniel Bedford Forrest, a founder of the Ku Klux Klan, Confederate general, and in the minds of many, a war criminal responsible for an indiscriminate slaughter of Black troops in the Civil War's Fort Pillow Massacre. Forrest's memory is still evoked by the name of town where my mom was born in 1927, less than an hour's drive from Fort Pillow and just over 60 years after the incident. Racism was a lifelong constraint in the life of my mother and the men in her family, illustrated by my father's struggles to find employment as a World War II veteran and by my uncle's mysterious death in an Omaha jail, several years after returning from the Korean War. And yet, even though her life's journey was indelibly affected by white supremacy, my mother gracefully welcomed Lisa into our home, contained feelings of disappointment, and, as the years went by, respected my choices through multiple decades of single adulthood. Such a commitment to respect consensual relationship choices within our circles should be an outcome of effective relationship education.

23 My mother's tolerance was informed by an empathic view of relationship variety, perhaps nurtured by her having spent the last five decades of her life as a single adult. Similarly, my own development of a nuanced and empathic view of all consensual relationships is a favorable consequence of thirty years of living as a single adult. Experiences during those years have led to questioning of key tenets within the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham and Saunders), including a determination to fully support and respect relationship journeys among people in our lives who choose to remain single. A protracted state of singlehood tends to fall outside of fundamental attributes of the heterosexual imaginary, such as

> highly intertwined networks of social arrangements and ideologies that include

social processes and practices such as dating, initiating sex, engagements, weddings, proms, and caring for children (Ingraham and Saunders).

24 These social processes contribute to the naturalization of heteronormative marriage as the ideal adult relationship status. However, it is also possible that non-normative life experiences connected to singlehood are not perceived as stigmatizing, but as liberating. Additionally, cultural assumptions about marriage and relationship health bear examination. Family research projects in recent years have probed a constellation of questions around singlehood, marriage, and heteronormativity, such as whether health related benefits of marriage are broadly accrued across population differences in age, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Robles); whether or not sexual monogamy, with its highly variable definitions and practices, represents "the most psychologically, socially, and culturally advantageous relationship configuration" (Conley et al., 13); whether trends toward cultural reductions in the pressure to marry have a positive impact on divorce rates, especially as cohorts of single people in their 20s delay marriage frequently but are less likely than their older peers to experience divorce (Kennedy and Ruggles); and even whether or not the so-called "marriage advantage" (common assumptions that compared to singlehood, marriage leads to more frequent and better quality sexual experiences) can be demonstrated empirically. In a related finding, the 1989-2014 General Social Survey reports that married people are now having sex less frequently than single people (55 times per year for married people, 59 times per year for single people), a significant drop in sexual frequency among married couples that reverses historic trends (Bahrampour).

25 These findings collectively point towards a cultural reimagining of what it means to be single in relation to life satisfaction, and I see this research as another retrospective window on past experiences. I often experienced singlehood as a fulfilling and enjoyable state of being which offered a clear path to establishing meaningful relationships (romantic and non-romantic), time to pursue a career, and opportunities to develop personal interests. However, single life also entailed periods of loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional vulnerability, leaving me more susceptible to unhealthy behavior patterns and questionable relationship choices. So, there are simultaneous principles to hold in thinking personally and politically about loving relationships. Enduring love and lifelong commitments can be transformative, but there are many relationship forms that do not constitute a marriage and yet provide emotional fulfillment.

***ALBM* While Black – Personal and Political Anecdotes**

26 The literature on relationship trends in recent decades sheds light on personal experiences that include the role of *ALBM* (a little bit married) relationships as an essential source of love and support. While the research suggests that Black men are less likely than the national average to have an enduring marriage, Black men commonly take part in support networks that bridge between families. This includes networks that include fictive kin – "individuals who are unrelated by either blood or marriage, but regard one another in kinship terms" (Taylor, et al.) or by participating in child rearing within an extended family. Such experiences are undervalued in a heteronormative cultural context.

27 Two specific recollections from my single years are described here to illustrate meaningful relationship experiences that are ignored or minimized in our culture due to idealizing of the Standard North American Family, the pervasiveness of singlism, and implicit bias – stereotypical assumptions that have concrete and measurable consequences on the everyday experiences of culturally marginalized people. The first recollection centers a Black female friend, a single parent, who I met during my mid-thirties. I was attracted to her but the attraction wasn't mutual, a disconnect that was obvious to people within our circle. After a year or so, I finally realized that there was no dating potential in this relationship, but I remained close to her and her two children for about four years. The care and support I provided extended to picking up her children regularly from day care, loaning her my car for both work and recreational purposes, and occasionally, making Friday night dinners of hot dogs and home fries for her children while she enjoyed an evening out for herself.

28 It was common for people in my circle to question why I provided such care and support and to suggest that she was taking advantage of kindness. These are reasonable concerns, but the concerns do not acknowledge a common cultural practice in a Black family context of creating caring bridges between families, a functional and adaptive response to the enduring economic and social consequences of white supremacy. I relate my provision of this extensive family support to Joan Morgan's characterization of "black-on-black love" as a deeply rooted cultural value (Morgan 71). As a child born in 1963 and nurtured by the political idealism and institutional change processes set in motion by the Civil Rights Movement, I recall the Black community of my youth as infused with black-on-black love, expressed among strangers in personal greetings, evoked in popular music of the Motown Soul era, and affirmed by the pride

taken in any significant accomplishments made by individual Black people, celebrities and local schoolchildren alike. The idealism of this moment, however, competed with emerging trends such as mass incarceration, deindustrialization, and internalized self-doubt, which proved quite difficult for many Black men to overcome "when it comes to facing the evils of the larger society, accepting responsibility for [our] lives or the lives of [our] children" (Morgan 75).

29 I regard the relationship with my friend as *ALBM* – a Little Bit Married. This relationship status often entails engaged and loving responses to the ongoing need for connected and healthy families, and there is no valid reason why a sexual relationship should be a prerequisite for providing mutual love and support. This is especially true given that within Black communities, 72% of children are being raised in single parent families, compared to a national average of 25% and an average of 14.9% among all industrialized countries (NewsOne). Among these single parent families who often face harsh cultural judgments due to heteronormativity, there are unmet needs for financial and emotional support that are beyond the capacity or the willingness of the state to provide. *ALBM* relationships are a common source of such support, including my temporary but meaningful presence in the life of my friend and her children. The last time I saw my woman friend was in a grocery store, and her older boy had just graduated from high school. He was shopping with his mother to stock up his first apartment. I remain proud of the shorter-term but very positive role I had in his life, making those daily trips to the day care when his mom was caught up in an impossibly busy phase of single parent life. Clearly, the connection was mutually fulfilling, beyond the common (and heterosexist) assumption that in an arrangement like this, a woman is taking advantage of a man's unrequited attraction for her.

30 The second recollection is centered the experiences of an extended family member, a nephew, and a child custody dispute that was impacted by racially-motivated singlism and implicit bias. At the time of this recollection, I was a gainfully employed single father of one biracial child. My former partner and I were never married, and it required intensive negotiations to establish guidelines for joint legal custody and a mutually satisfactory routine of physical custody for our child. With the help of private mediation, however, an agreement was reached for custody arrangements, and further interactions were avoided with an overburdened family court system that does not have the capacity to fully arbitrate individual cases.

31 A few years after my own custody case was settled, my nephew became a father in the context of an *ALBM* relationship. At the time of the pregnancy, my nephew was living with a partner in Los Angeles, CA. To seek greater family support, my nephew and his partner moved to central California and resided in the home of his mother (my sister). These living arrangements worked on a temporary basis; however, a custody dispute began when the partner relocated, with the baby but without mutual consent, to her parent's home in Northern California. A legal dispute began with both parents desiring full custody of the baby.

32 Hearing about these events from a distance, I decided to take family leave time to go to California to provide care and support. Previous experiences of being *ALBM* in a child custody context informed my assumption that sustained personal support and an awareness of family court processes would be an asset to my nephew during the preparation for the court action. As a younger adult, my nephew and his siblings were a source of emotional connection and early experiences in caring for children, and seeing my nephew's struggles as a new father reminded me of a broader social context related to race, gender, and parenthood. Being subjected to implicit bias is a risk when Black or interracial families turn to family court to resolve differences. Cultural assumptions about Black hypersexuality and sexual irresponsibility, assumptions that have been reinforced through racially-provocative disparagement of the Black family as dysfunctional and welfare-dependent, can be embodied by ways that the competence and commitment of a Black parent are questioned in a court setting. Anti-Black stereotypes can influence legal system responses to bi-racial couples as well, despite the longstanding *Loving v. Virginia* decisions that prohibits racial discrimination in family law:

> [The] enforcement of child custody, adoption laws, and criminal laws, to name a few, operate together to effectively legally sanction and deter interracial relationships, even when laws have the objective of regulating other activity (Kim 779).

The influence of racial stereotyping in legal settings creates a hazard for Black people that resembles other instances where *de jure* discrimination is prohibited but *de facto* discrimination continues; the mechanism for *de facto* discrimination in this case is "a proxy regulation of interracial relationships" through court processes (Kim 779). Such discrimination is a particular risk in cases involving Black-white marriages, which in the most recent U.S. Census still represented only 7.9% of all interracial marriages (Kim 776).

33 My nephew's daughter was born to unmarried, interracial (Black male, white female) parents, complicating factors in an emerging legal dispute over custody. To provide care and concern during my days in California, I had several conversations with my nephew to help him anticipate the challenges he may encounter in his pursuit of a mutually agreeable settlement of the custody issues. The issue of implicit bias is a general concern for Black people interacting with the court system, and for a larger black male like my nephew, who was about 6'5" with an athletic build, the physical contrast between him and his smaller white partner was visually striking. Additionally, in relation to gender identity, a pattern of findings shows that 75% of child custody cases are won by the female party, and nearly 40% of noncustodial fathers have no access to or visitation with their children (Child Custody Statistics). These findings indicate the influence of *tender years* doctrine that, until the 1970s, gave broad preference to mothers in custody cases under the presumption that "maternal nurture" was in the best interest of children of tender years (Rose and Wong 4). While the *tender years* standard has been amended in many states, its constitutionality was never challenged, and a more recent standard of a "primary caretaker presumption" is a frequently applied standard in custody decisions, favoring mothers more often than fathers (Rose and Wong 5). Despite these potential obstacles to a decision in his favor, I encouraged my nephew to advocate for what he felt was the best result for his new daughter since, despite the potential for bias, a court hearing provides a formal legal process for determining custody questions.

34 In his first appearance, the family court found in favor of visitation for my nephew, but temporary legal custody of his daughter was awarded to the partner. The temporary order was subject to an additional legal challenge, which my nephew desired to do. However, challenging the order required a four-hour trip to Sacramento for the filing of court papers. I rode along and shadowed him for this experience, which required overnight travel, a rental car and hotel, and lost wages to execute.

35 The court process unfolded over two days and three lengthy visits to the William R. Ridgeway Family Relations Courthouse in suburban Sacramento. Shadowing him during this process was evocative of an ethnographic exercise in participant observation. While I was not an objective observer, I watched the process closely enough to provide advice and support during my nephew's negotiation with a complex bureaucratic system that had legal standing to make final decisions about child custody. I observed what I would characterize as microaggressions –

subtle, indirect, and perhaps unintentional racial slights – as clerks and court advocates responded to his presence and questions. However, I was distanced enough from the immediate emotions of this context to encourage him to respond calmly and to get as much information as he could from each conversation without antagonizing anyone that might have a decision-making role in this process.

36 At the end of a long first day at the courthouse, we drove to the temporary place of residence for my nephew's daughter and ex-partner, which was her parents' house, also in suburban Sacramento. No invitation was given to enter the house, so by the side of our rental car, I met and held my great niece for the first time. I also did my best to maintain the care and comfort for my nephew, who was embarrassed by this situation and surprised by my courtesy under these circumstances. Past experiences with being *ALBM* had provided insight on negotiating through a potentially volatile situation involving child custody.

37 The court process required a second day at the Family Relations Courthouse, which was the final opportunity to file court papers challenging the order awarding legal custody to the ex-partner. With the backdrop of time pressure in a county where no friends or supportive family resided, we were informed by the court clerk that a local witness was needed to sign and file the court papers. Through brainstorming, we eventually did identify an appropriate witness and returned to the county building just in time to meet a 4 p.m. filing deadline. Ultimately, my nephew was able to advocate successfully for legal custody of his daughter, and I was left with a reminder of the importance of relationship literacy amid this time of change in the structure of families.

Marriage and Enduring Love – Personal Commitments

38 After navigating a winding path to a loving marriage, and I still strive to remember many important lessons I learned in my life as a single person and to bring those lessons into a larger social context. I have experienced the hurt when your ways of expressing love are considered less worthy, incomplete, or illegitimate, even by close friends or family. I have faced the challenge of having only yourself, it seems, to rely on for solving financial, health, and family problems. These challenges in mind, I remain committed to being a supportive presence when others feel alienated due to their marital status.

39 Recently published scholarship in family studies uses empirical tools to assess trends and outcomes, but the task remains of advocating for next common steps toward greater acceptance of all relationships. This work is personal as well as political, and in that spirit, I remain committed to being a supportive presence for others who feel alienated by heteronormativity in its multiple and intersectional dimensions. I join with Bell and Hastings who call for all of us "to become more accustomed to seeing interracial relationships as part of the fabric of a diverse country" (Bell and Hastings 768), and to nurture loving relationships of among all sexualities and asexualities. Despite continuing social sanction and state repression, I join with Lori Jo Marso in support of

> the legitimate wishes of adults who choose not to marry, who are divorced, who remain single, who choose to live with their sibling(s), who desire to live with two or three others, or who wish to cohabit (and practice sexual relations) in a variety of ways outside the boundaries of the married couple. Not only should these kinds of consensual relationships be considered legitimate lifestyle choices by all, but the state should not…be linking our benefits and rights as citizens to our sexual and intimate choices (Marso 149-150).

I encourage all to challenge any devaluation that heterosexism imposes on people who are single by choice, or by lack of choice, or anyone else who chooses a relationship model that is outside of heteronormative frameworks. *Obergefell v. Hodges* is an excellent starting point for moving forward, but the arduous work continues of creating safer social spaces for enduring love.

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