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## Article

# Racial Illiteracies and Whiteness: Exploring Black Mixed-Race Narrations of Race in the Family

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**Abstract:** Drawing upon fifty-five interviews with Black mixed-race people located in Britain's second-largest city, Birmingham, and a nearby satellite town, Bromsgrove, this article critically explores how race, identity, and whiteness, are negotiated in mixed-race families. Whilst existing studies tend to centre upon the experiences of white parents raising their children, in this article, we foreground Black mixed-race perspectives of familial practices. Whiteness can often function as an ever-present non-presence in explorations of mixed identities. We utilise concepts such as white fragility, white complicity and the white gaze to make whiteness visible and to address how racial illiteracies can manifest within everyday family settings. In doing so, we suggest that white family members can, on occasion, participate in processes of white domination even in the smallest everyday acts and conversations that deny, avoid, dismiss and, in some cases, even perpetuate racism. By identifying these moments in Black mixed-race lives, we complicate some of the studies that document the racial literacies of white parents and explore how mistakes are made. We suggest that these encounters can create moments of disjuncture in familial settings that are characterised by a complex layer of love, intimacy and racial difference. By bringing these issues to the fore, we centre the emotional labour it can take on the part of Black mixed-race people to make sense of and resist these experiences whilst simultaneously maintaining closeness within familial relationships.

**Keywords:** mixed-race; family; whiteness; black mixed-race; identity; racial illiteracies; racism; critical mixed-race studies



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## 1. Introduction

This article critically examines the pernicious, mundane, and ambivalent ways that race and whiteness function within mixed families. Drawing on fifty-five Black mixed-race reflective accounts of childhood, parenting, and intimate family relationships, we identify how hegemonic whiteness manifests within family settings and can work to justify, deny, and silence racism and race talk (Ware 1992; Roediger 1994; Lewis 2004; Hughey 2012; Lentini 2020). We contend that whiteness should not be treated as an ambivalent aspect of Black mixed-race families but as an integral part of these intimate settings and demonstrate how its ever-present non-presence shapes familial relations (Britton 2013). Drawing on concepts including the white gaze, white fragility and white complicity (Applebaum 2007; Yancy 2017; DiAngelo 2018), we explore how whiteness can shape even the most quotidian routines of mixed-race family lives.

Whilst existing studies have documented how whiteness is experienced within mixed-race family settings, it tends to capture the point of view of white family members and their affective experiences of identity and subjectivity at the expense of mixed-race perceptions (Banks 1996; Twine 2004; Harman 2013). One of the most notable analyses of white family members' experiences within their mixed families is Twine's (2004) work on 'racial literacies', which evidences the crucial role white parents can play in promoting positive racialised identities for their Black mixed-race children by practising anti-racist parenting

strategies. Notwithstanding the evidence of ‘racial literacy’ in the existing studies on mixed families in Britain (Campion 2021a; Lewis 2021; Joseph-Salisbury 2018a; SuAndi 2019), in this article, we build on these findings to account for some of the difficult moments that can exist alongside, and sometimes in place of, these positive practices. Put simply, we want to foreground examples of racial illiteracies that can occur within the microcosm of mixed-race families and ask how these might reflect (and reproduce) wider systems of racial inequalities that exist within white hegemonic societies such as Britain. In the article, we move beyond analyses of whiteness that focus on questions of white subjectivity, identity, and practices and suggest that ‘no white person can stand outside of the system’ (Applebaum 2007, p. 43), whether they are in a Black mixed-race family or otherwise. Using this as a starting point, we identify how unequal relations of power can exist within familial relationships, and consider what tensions this can throw up for family members. By dealing with some of these difficult questions and providing examples of how race can become reified within mixed family settings, we complicate and add nuance to some of the popular representations of mixed-race families as emblems of our ‘melting pot’ society and so-called post-racial futures (Caballero et al. 2008).

We see Black/white mixed families as an important unit of analysis through which to explore our questions because of how they are positioned along binarised notions of race. People of white and Black heritage are often the group that comes to mind when we talk of ‘mixed-race’ precisely because of their proximity to Blackness and whiteness. They are grounded in race because they sit at the intersections of two diametrically opposed racialised categories that are mutually constitutive—Black as a deficit and deviance against the purity and power of whiteness. In recent years there have been calls to move beyond a focus on Black/white mixed identities and ‘decolonise’ mixed-race studies (Mahtani 2014). Whilst we agree with this sentiment, we also contend that the ongoing pervasiveness of anti-Black racism that contributes towards extensive inequalities in Black and Black mixed-race lives,<sup>1</sup> albeit in different ways, should remain a key motivation for analysing Black mixed-race populations and their families, as we seek to develop our focus on under-researched mixed populations (Campion and Joseph-Salisbury 2021; Tikly et al. 2004; Lewis and Demie 2019). Furthermore, our specific focus on how *whiteness* in the family shapes their experiences provides an original intervention and contribution to the scholarship. As Britton (2013, p. 1320) notes, the marginal position of whiteness in ‘studies of mixed-parentage families’ is evidence of how it can operate as an ‘empty category that escapes definition and remains unseen’ (see also Byrne 2006). In this article, we bring whiteness into view.

## 2. Families, Racial Difference and Raising Mixed-Race People

Despite the co-optation of mixed-race people, families, and relationships as emblems of our melting pot societies within the context of ascendent ‘post-racial’ discourses (Goldberg 2015; Louis 2015; Joseph-Salisbury 2018b; McNeil 2012), mixed families are still vulnerable to pervasive stereotypes and pathological representations which cast them as microsites for culture clashes. Only in 2006 did the Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), Trevor Phillips, warn about ‘children who grow up marooned between communities’ in Britain. Comments such as these reify and reproduce pseudo-scientific racist ideas of the early 20th century, which pathologised mixed-race, or ‘half-caste’, as a torn and confused identity (Fletcher 1930; Bland 2005; Christian 2008). A breadth of existing studies on mixed-race families poses a direct challenge to such ideas by demonstrating the important and positive roles that family members play in raising mixed-race children (Twine 2004; Caballero et al. 2008; Bauer 2010; Joseph-Salisbury 2018a).

Understandably, a large part of this empirical work has focused specifically on the role of parents. One of the most notable interventions that has explored parenting strategies in (specifically Black) mixed-race families is Twine’s (2004) concept of racial literacy, which describes how white parents (primarily mothers) develop specific practices that are consciously anti-racist to support their children in countering and building resilience against

the racism they face in white hegemonic societies. The practices she identifies include the adaptation of home spaces through the addition of anti-racist interiors such as Black-inspired art/furniture, facilitating close proximity and relationships with Black family members, and supporting their child's development of specialist counter-cultural knowledge by enrolling them in Black supplementary schools (Joseph-Salisbury and Andrews 2017). When reflecting on the specific experiences of white parents within mixed-race family settings, some studies suggest that the racial consciousness they can develop is partly due to the 'rebound racism' they might experience owing to their position within interracial relationships and family contexts (Frankenberg 1993). For working-class mothers who are white, in particular, racial consciousness and reflections about their positionality might also come about through a combination of the enduring gendered and classed based pathologies associated with them<sup>2</sup> (Skeggs 2004; Harman 2010; Edwards and Caballero 2011).

A breadth of studies foregrounding the voices of white mothers evidences the marginality and prejudice some can experience due to being in interracial relationships and families, which includes; rejection from racist white family members, loss of support networks, social disapproval, and negative judgements about their abilities to parent mixed-race children effectively, to name a few (Harman 2013; Lewis 2009; Twine 1999; Ali 2003; Edwards and Caballero 2011). Some have argued that these experiences of marginalisation can result in white people in mixed-race families becoming 'outsiders within' (Twine and Steinbugler 2006, p. 345). These shifting racial locations, it is suggested, can recast white people's 'vision of Whiteness and themselves as White', might enable white people to develop a sense of "double consciousness" (ibid, p. 345), and can even result in the loss of white privilege for the lone white mothers of mixed-race children (Harman 2010). Findings such as these seem to suggest that membership in mixed families can become a catalyst for stimulating a form of racial reawakening or reckoning with the self for white people. In this article, we complicate some of these claims. Whilst we agree that white subjects within mixed-race families may become more visible, develop a heightened awareness of their racialised position, and move less easily through the world as a result; we see this as a *situated* identity that does not result in the privileges of whiteness somehow becoming forfeited.

This article therefore builds and develops upon the existing studies, which, we suggest, can oftentimes centre on white subjective (and affective) experiences of mixed-race families, which risks individualising whiteness at the expense of analysis that explores the complex ways that 'power circulates through all white bodies' (Applebaum 2010, p. 17). In other words, we seek to ask more questions about the systemic structure of white supremacy that these parents are working against and within.

### 3. Whiteness Is, Whiteness Ain't

"White people perform and sustain whiteness continuously, often without conscious intent, often by doing nothing out of the ordinary. Moreover, white complicity is not exclusively a matter of doing or not doing but often a matter of just being". (Applebaum 2007, p. 456)

We start this section with this quote to emphasise that white people, no matter what the ethnicity of their partners or children, are implicated by whiteness in their everyday. In her conceptualisation of 'white fragility' in the U.S. context, DiAngelo (2018, p. 81) notes that 'no cross-racial relationship is free from the dynamics of racism in this society'. As existing studies evidencing the importance of racial literacy in mixed-race families shows (Twine 2004; Joseph-Salisbury 2018a; Champion 2021a), this does not negate white people's ability to challenge the racism that structures our society from within their families. Nevertheless, we want to complicate claims that suggest racial competence, consciousness, and a heightened awareness of race and racism are able to create a 'gap between whites and whiteness' (Twine and Steinbugler 2006). In a sense, in the article, we try to move beyond an analysis of individual white people and their moral sensibilities. Our unit of analysis is not white people in their roles as parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, and their individual affective experiences within mixed-race family settings. Rather, a central question which

undergirds our discussion asks how whiteness as a hegemonic force organises social life and penetrates racially mixed families *from the perspective of Black mixed-race people*. Whilst we have a good understanding of how the burden of race can weigh heavy on some white people parenting through racial difference, the voices of mixed-race people's experience of these dynamics are less prevalent in the existing studies, with some exceptions (Lewis 2009; Joseph-Salisbury 2018a; Pang 2018).

In her analysis of how whiteness is represented in the Black imagination (particularly within white majority places and spaces), bell Hooks (1997, p. 165) suggests that Black people possess a 'special knowledge' about white people. This accumulation of knowledge, she notes, has a long history. Black people have needed to engage in 'psychoanalytical readings of the white 'Other'' in order to survive and navigate a white supremacist society (ibid). Her writing on the U.S. context, with its history of segregation, conceptualises Black people as external voyeurs, looking in from the outside, trying to make sense of white behaviour, morality, and psyche. Conversely, for the Black mixed-race people in our studies, they are genealogically, socially and culturally related to the white people and *whiteness* within their families. In a sense, they are 'insiders'.

An important consideration for this article is whether this close proximity to whiteness somehow demystifies it? Gail Lewis' (2009) autobiographical work that reflects on her upbringing as a Black mixed-race young person born in 1950s London suggests this might not be the case. Lewis poignantly describes the 'simultaneous closeness and distance,' and 'proximity of love and racism' that structured the relationship with her white mother during this fraught post-war period of explicit racism in Britain (ibid: p. 14). Her mother, she notes, would often remind her that she 'never stopped paying' for having Black (mixed-race) children—A thought that would consume Lewis 'every now and then' (ibid: p. 9). As noted, in existing studies on mixed-race families, it is often the feelings of white family members that are centred in the analyses. However, anecdotes such as this show how Black mixed-race people can be burdened with holding their white parents' feelings in mind. Our findings raise important questions about whether the existing emphasis on white subjectivities in the literature is simply responding to the voices that are systematically prioritised within the mixed-race family at the expense of insights such as these from mixed-race people themselves.

In DiAngelo's (2011) work on white fragilities, her conceptualisation of white-affective responses to 'racial stress' illustrates how the centring of white feelings might work to sustain and reproduce whiteness. She argues that, due to their dominant position in society, white people are ill-equipped to deal with this form of stress in the way people of colour are because they are 'almost always racially comfortable' (ibid., p. 60). Therefore, when racial triggers arise and white people are taken out of their comfort zone, this can prompt emotive reactions such as sadness, anger, anxiety, and frustration. In the context of discussing race and racism, affective responses such as this can have a negative impact on racialised minorities insofar as they centre on whiteness and constrain the ability for critical analysis of structural racism by diverting attention away from the victims of these unequal relations of power. Much of the aforementioned studies evidence how white parents and other family members respond to *external* racial stressors, discrimination and prejudice aimed at them as individuals or the family unit as a collective. Evidence of racial literacy within mixed families shows the tools that can be used to successfully resist these challenges. Comparatively, less is known about the racial triggers that can arise *within* the context of mixed-race families and how these might be (mis)handled by white family members. In our analyses of the everyday slippages that can occur around race talk in the family, we consider how white family members can unwittingly sustain and reproduce whiteness within this context (Britton 2013).

Concepts such as the white gaze are useful tools to do such an analysis. Rather than a single act or a one-off interpersonal event, we see the white gaze as the product *and producer* of an assemblage of racist ideas, beliefs, and common-sense understandings that maintain hegemonic whiteness (Yancy 2017; Fanon 1986; Gilroy 2000; Du Bois 1903). As Fanon's

(1986) *Black Skin, White Masks* and Du Bois's (1903) concept of 'double consciousness' suggest, the white gaze does not simply look upon Black bodies but significantly transforms how those bodies come to think of themselves as Other in the process. It is a perpetual feature of white-majority societies such as Britain, and as we will go on to discuss, mixed-race families are not immune from its effects. We consider whether, when in the presence of white family members, the participants in our studies ever see themselves through the reductive lens of the white gaze. Further, how does white gazing, consciously or unconsciously, sustain and maintain a relative position of power for white people in mixed-race families? These are some of the questions we explore through our findings.

#### 4. Methods

This article draws upon data collected from interviews with fifty-five people conducted between 2015 and 2019 for two studies, which we refer to as Study A and Study B. Study A comprised a total of 37 semi-structured interviews with people of Mixed White and Black Caribbean heritage living in Birmingham, the UK's second-largest city (Campion 2021a, 2021b). Study B comprised a total of 18 narrative ethnographic interviews with Black Caribbean and white English and Irish mixed-race families living in Bromsgrove, a predominantly white semi-rural/suburban town in Worcestershire, England, located just thirteen miles south-west of Birmingham (Lewis 2021). The participants were aged between 18 and 59 and were recruited using a range of approaches. For Study A, informal networks were utilised, and recruitment posters were also distributed on neighbourhood Facebook pages, in Black hairdressers, leisure centres, libraries, community centres, and colleges across Birmingham. The term 'mixed-race' was not used on the poster so as to encourage the participation of people who had mixed backgrounds but did not identify themselves as such. Instead, 'White and Black Caribbean heritage' was chosen as an appropriate catch-all term that would appeal to a broad mixed-race audience. For Study B, informal networks were utilised as well as some snowballing sampling (recommendations via other families who took part). Our sample comprises a diverse range of age groups. Study A, for instance, specifically adopts a social generational approach by dividing the thirty-seven participants into three birth cohorts (1960s, 1970s and 1980s). In light of this, it is important to note that the participants' experiences of family, race, whiteness and the intergenerational relationships and conversations about such topics are profoundly shaped by, and deeply rooted within, different socio-political contexts in Britain. As we present our data, we try to signal the participants' social generational locations to acknowledge important intersectional differences amongst the sample and to locate the families within particular time periods.

Located in the West Midlands region of England, the two research locations are in close proximity but profoundly distant in terms of their difference in relation to local demographics of race and histories of migrant presence. Whilst Birmingham is a large, post-colonial, post-industrial city (Noxolo 2018), the legacies of which can be seen in the contemporary multiculturalism of the city,<sup>3</sup> and the fact that it has the largest mixed population in Britain, after London. Comparatively, Bromsgrove is a majority-white town with a much smaller ethnic minority presence. Nevertheless, as research increasingly shows, satellite towns such as Bromsgrove are growing in diversity, which is a demographic change that study B aims to capture by centring the voices of the town's mixed-race residents and families. Notwithstanding these stark differences between our research locations, existing evidence of gradual deconcentration of racialised minorities in cities<sup>4</sup>, and their movement outwards into the suburbs and beyond, Bromsgrove and Birmingham are perhaps more closely related than one might think. By bringing together our large dataset, drawn from across the region, we paint a comprehensive picture of mixedness in the West Midlands.

We should note, however, that despite our attempts to encourage conversations about whiteness as it is experienced within the family unit as a whole, the reader will notice that the findings are slightly skewed towards a focus on white mothers as parents. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that our samples mirror the gendered pattern of inter-ethnic partnerships in Britain. For instance, for Black Caribbean people in the UK, men are more

likely to partner with people from a different ethnic group than women (Tizard and Phoenix 1993). Compounding this statistical fact is the patriarchal, gendered structures of parenting. White mothers were often described as primary carers, even in situations where parents were in a cohabiting relationship. All of this combined meant that when speaking about whiteness in the family, our participants could easily slip into discussions about their mothers—A phenomenon (Campion 2021a) describes elsewhere as the *maternal weight of whiteness*.

### 5. A Note on Positionality

The two authors are Black mixed-race women, which is reminiscent of much of the scholarship on mixedness over the past two decades that has tended to be ‘insider led’, largely undertaken by mixed-race social researchers and women in particular (Zack 1993; Olumide 2002; Ali 2003; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Caballero 2013; Joseph-Salisbury 2018b). Further to this, both authors originate from the respective research locations, Birmingham and Bromsgrove. Given the ethnic and localised identities we share with our participants, when conducting the interviews, there were moments when overlaps in our experiences were made apparent or explicitly addressed by the interviewees. In Study A, this included questions from participants about the neighbourhood Campion grew up in, to more direct queries about how she self-identified, ethnically. In these moments, the microphone was, at times, turned back on us. In Study B, the identity of Lewis was particularly pertinent to some of the discussions, as she found that the interviews with the families could themselves become sites of disclosure on occasion. To put it simply, the interview was the first place that issues around mixedness, identity, racism, whiteness, family and belonging had ever been openly discussed. Therefore, there were some ethical considerations that needed to be addressed in Study B in recognition of the fact that these moments could be transformative for the families. Whilst a number of participants shared with the researcher how good it felt to share their stories, in this way, we are aware that initial feelings of relief might also be accompanied by frustration, sadness and other emotions. When researching manifestations of racism through the recollection of experiences of prejudice or discrimination, it is fundamental that steps are taken to ensure that the conversation feels safe (Bulmer and Solomos 2004). In anticipation of potential ethical issues, Lewis introduced the research to participants at an early stage by sharing the interview guide prior to the interviews taking place. This approach enabled the participants to familiarise themselves with the subject matter, prepare accordingly, and ask additional questions if needed. Additionally, great care was taken to ensure the conversations did not end abruptly. Lewis committed to several interviews with each family member, allowed participants to contact them during the research process, and signposted to follow up services if deemed necessary.

We are aware that being ‘racially matched’ with participants does not provide researchers access to a ‘single truth or reality’ (Rhodes 1994, p. 458; Song and Parker 1995). Despite our various commonalities, there were also elements of disjuncture between us, as ethnicity was not the sole ‘social signifier’ in the interviews (Twine 2000, p. 9). Notwithstanding these points of divergence, our possession of local knowledge and shared ethnic identity could also provide some reassurance to the participants, especially when the topic of conversation turned to uncomfortable discussions.

### 6. Encounters with Explicit Racism and Rejection from White Family

We begin our findings by foregrounding some of the explicit experiences of racism our participants could experience within their families before moving on to trace the subtle ways that whiteness and racism can shape familial intimacies and feelings of belonging for Black mixed-race people. Although experiences of overt racism from immediate and extended family members tended to be less common than subtle slights and indignities, explicit racist behaviours were a feature within a number of families across both of the studies, with some participants even reporting it as a relatively normal aspect of family life (Phoenix and Brannen 2014). The older participants in the studies born in the 1960s and

1970s tended to report the most severe cases of racism, but this was not unique to particular age cohorts (Campion 2021a).

Joanne, 42 (Study A), was brought up by her Black family in Birmingham in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Her mother had been disowned by her white family because her partner and children were Black. During her early childhood, Joanne was brought up mostly by her Black grandparents. At around nine years old, she began having more contact with her white family, who lived in a majority-white neighbourhood, Castle Vale. Originally one of Birmingham's aspiring new housing estates that was built on the periphery of the city in the 1960s but by the 1980s had started to deteriorate. Below, Joanne remembers increasing contact with her white family as a child and describes how this negatively impacted her feelings of self-worth.

"It was like 'oooo look at your hair it's like a brillo pad', and I [ ... ] used to feel dirty around my white family [ ... ] I can't remember what age I was ... it must have been before I was 10 ... I actually wanted to scrub myself clean, when I was at primary school. Because when we lived in Castle Vale it was predominantly white.

When I was younger [during] my childhood thinking that my white family didn't think I was worth anything [ ... ] being rejected, that was horrible as a kid, I can't even explain the feeling. It makes you feel like you just wanna disappear [ ... ] their blood's running through your veins [ ... ] I couldn't understand why they were like that".

In this excerpt, Joanne's white family contributes to her undoing. Her encounters with them prompted her to want to physically alter her complexion, which suggests acute psychological distress on her part. Despite being raised mostly by her Black family, her fleeting interactions with her white family caused her a great deal of harm, and their white gaze made her feel unworthy and unclean (Yancy 2017). In this anecdote, we see how Joanne feels the 'peculiar sensation' of double consciousness as she comes to understand how white people can look upon Black people, even within family situations (Du Bois 1903). The urges she felt to scrub her skin 'clean' and the visceral description of her white family's blood 'running' through her body, vividly convey feelings of contamination, repulsion and self-hate. Joanne is unable to make sense of how family relations that were supposed to be supportive pillars in her life, propped up by unconditional love, could be severed by racialised differences.

Audrey, 56 (Study A), was born in 1959 and reported similar experiences of abjection but specifically in relation to her white mother. Reminiscent of Gail Lewis' (2009, pp. 17, 18) poignant retelling of her mother's 'six backstreet abortions', a 'symbol of how impossible' she must have found it to have Black children, Audrey reflects on her own mother's fraught relationship with fertility, reproduction, and race.

"She probably regretted going out with a Black man [ ... ] but they had no choice in them days, there was no pill, she was the first in the queue when the pill came out, she always said that [ ... ] she just had one kid after the other, she had no choice".

Anecdotes such as this are representative of a moment in time when reproductive rights were in their infancy and women struggled to have ownership over their bodies. Yet, they also provide in-depth insights into how questions of race and whiteness could be an additional compounding factor for women navigating interracial relationships in the 1960s. Evidently, the angst around *reproducing race* in such a way that did not maintain whiteness within the family was a worry for some white women like Audrey's mother, and seemingly, these anxieties were sometimes shared with their Black mixed-race children. In this example, Audrey sees herself as a regret, a forced outcome, a burden on her mother, and an unwelcome consequence of interracial sex. Whilst much of the existing scholarship has documented how white parents (mothers in particular) can experience rejection due to their mixed relationships and families (Harman 2010; Edwards and Caballero 2011), our findings

demonstrate how this can transfer to their Black mixed-race children, in quite harmful ways. Although Joanne and Audrey's examples are distinct, in both examples, their Black mixed-race bodies are juxtaposed against the purity of whiteness. Through Joanne's urges to scrub herself clean and Audrey feeling like a visual signifier of her mother's racial transgression, the omnipresence of whiteness as a governing force in their lives is laid bare.

### 7. White Gazing and Mundane Familial Encounters

"The Black body, through the hegemony of the white gaze, undergoes a phenomenological return that leaves it distorted". (Yancy 2017, p. 106)

In this section, we foreground examples of everyday racialised encounters in the family to demonstrate how race can be evoked in mundane conversations and within normative family practices. This, we argue, can result in such interactions becoming routinised in family cultures, reproduced as ordinary, normative, and thus incontestable, despite the impact they can have on Black mixed-race family members (Phoenix and Brannen 2014). In the forthcoming examples, we show that when in the presence of white family members, some of our participants could, at times, see themselves through the reductive lens of the white gaze, which complicates claims of postraciality that mixed-race families are often imagined to embody (Joseph-Salisbury 2018b). Daisy, 26 (Study B), grew up in Bromsgrove in a large mixed-race family (one of five siblings) during the late 1990s and 2000's. Below she describes a common exchange she would often have with her white mother during preparations for family outings to important events, such as weddings, funerals or birthday parties.

"When I used to wear my hair curly and we are going to an event she [mother] would say, 'straighten it, straighten it, so you look smart' [ . . . ] She used to say it all the time, 'straighten it so you look smart'. It's just a standard thing that was always said".

In Daisy's example, we see how racialised relationships in the family play out in quotidian routines. Daisy notes that her mother would 'always' suggest she straighten her hair before an event. In this example, we see how race talk can manifest within the family in the form of uncontested scripts which are reproduced over time without challenge (Kuhn 1995). Daisy explains that this was a regular exchange she often had with her mother. In some respects, a mother's critique of her daughter's appearance could be read as a typical example of maternal tough love, a relatively unremarkable act. Whilst this may be true, we also see mixed-race families as a 'microlevel political site' (Twine and Steinbugler 2006, p. 341) that are not immune to, or devoid of, external racial inequalities, hierarchies and white hegemony.

In white hegemonic societies, the white gaze appeals to white people to look upon the Black body as unruly, undisciplined, unkept, and Other in order to, consciously or unconsciously, maintain a relative position of power and privilege (Lewis 2004). In this example, each time the exchange takes place, Daisy's mother unknowingly projects her white gaze onto her daughter's natural kinks and coils. Although her mother does not explicitly denigrate Daisy's natural hair, she reproduces common sense racist understandings about what constitutes beauty and respectability, and by asking Daisy to conform to these standards, she unwittingly upholds and reproduces them (Tate 2005; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Dabiri 2019). In this example, the omnipresence of whiteness as a governing force within the family is evident.

Similar to Daisy, other participants described how their Black aesthetic could, at times, be commented upon by white family members. Anthony, 36 (Study A), describes the racialized curiosity instigated by his white grandparents on his visits to their house during his youth. He displays some feelings of unease and irritation at their curiosity.

"My granddad was a hard Scottish man[ . . . ] I'm not saying he didn't love us but he was the man of the house [ . . . ] they take care of you in a different way but erm, my nan like was a reflection of maybe the world around outside [ . . . ]

they loved me, you know they gave me positive reinforcement but it was always like an air of fascination or misunderstanding [ . . . ] about . . . just who I am . . . like I say, little things like my hair [ . . . ] when I started to get a bit older and fashion sense [ . . . ] because obviously it was predominantly black [ . . . ] it was always that air of you know . . . they didn't quite get it and they'd always ask questions like, 'why do you turn your jeans up like that?' 'Why do you put them lines in your hair?' Do you get what I mean? Like it was those little things where I had to explain to myself, well this is fashion, this is black fashion".

Coming of age in 1980s inner-city Birmingham, in other parts of his interview, Anthony had described the great pride he took in developing his distinctly Black cultural style as a young person. He spoke about the great lengths he went to in order to create his 'look', taking his influence from the ascendant African-American hip-hop styles of the period (Campion 2021a). Similar to Daisy, his hair (in addition to his fashion choices) becomes somewhat devalued through his grandparents' innocent intrigue. He describes a sense of feeling Othered and experiencing fleeting moments of heightened visibility in these relatively mundane encounters. In this example, we see once again how hegemonic whiteness that orders, what Anthony referred to as 'the world around outside', can creep into family relationships.

### 8. Protecting, Challenging, Contesting—Varied Responses to Whiteness and Racial Illiteracies in the Family

In the previous sections, we demonstrated the explicit and mundane ways that whiteness can shape family encounters. We contend that these everyday enactments of Othering, misunderstanding and misrecognition in mixed-race families are clear examples of how racial *illiteracies* can exist alongside (or even in place of) white anti-racist practices in these intimate settings (Twine 2004). In this section, we build upon the previous arguments by tracing how Black mixed-race people conceptualise and respond to these incidents in different ways. For a number of our participants, these incidents were simply facts of life, and due to their tendency to be implicit nature, they were rarely thought of as needing to be directly challenged. In these cases, we identified a culture of silence between family members when it came to race talk. For some participants, the decision to remain silent and not confront family members was rationalised using discourses of white innocence (Wekker 2016).

Lucy, 27 (Study B), was raised in Alvechurch, a majority-white village in the Bromsgrove district located just outside the south of Birmingham, with her white mother and Black father. She attended school in Bromsgrove. Similar to many of the families in Study B, Bromsgrove and the suburbs, more broadly, had been generationally understood as containing 'good schools' and providing a safer place for children to grow up (Troyna and Hatcher 1992; Knowles and Ridley 2005). Below, she describes how her mother often (mis)handled the pervasive racism she experienced throughout primary school.

"Mum's perspective back then, we didn't really have those conversations. Like, it didn't need to have much light on it, because she didn't get it, so you know. She didn't hear what people in the playground was saying, so yeah. She just thought, 'people are asking why are you brown, you go and tell them at school that you're brown because of this', and embrace the colour of your skin [ . . . ] you look like you've been on holiday".

In her account, Lucy appears to forgive her mother's inability to support her through these moments at school because, in her opinion, she simply 'didn't get it.' For Lucy, her mother's display of, what Mills (1997) refers to as, an 'epistemology of ignorance' of racism appears to be perceived by her as the innocent fallout of their racialised differences and her mother's whiteness. In her reasoning, we see how *race* can come to be understood as the property of people of colour, and thus *racism* becomes a problem for them to resolve (Applebaum 2010). On the contrary, Lucy's mother's whiteness retains its neutrality, its invisibility, and its innocence in relation to these issues. She is not required to speak on

such topics, despite the fact that Lucy would likely have benefitted from a competent, racially literate response (Twine 2004). Further, her mother's advice to respond to these racist incidents by boasting that her brown skin is reminiscent of a sun-tanned holiday aesthetic works to trivialise, mute and deny the racism she experiences (Frankenberg 1993).

One poignant consequence of white family members' racial illiteracies was the internalisation of such issues by a number of our participants. Many simply chose to keep conversations about the racism they had experienced to a minimum with white family members, in anticipation that these might be inadequately dealt with but also in order to protect their white family members' feelings and, ultimately, their white innocence (DiAngelo 2018; Wekker 2016). Rebecca, 31, and Joe, 29 (Study B), grew up in Bromsgrove with their white mother and Black Kittitian father. Below they discuss the plethora of racism they experienced whilst attending a predominantly white secondary school and articulate why they felt uncomfortable speaking to their white mother about their experiences.

**Rebecca:** "It's hard for us because I would naturally probably want to go to my mum, I think, because of being female. But then we also have the—My mum's not of mixed-race, so it's almost [ . . . ] will it upset her, hearing our experiences?"

**Joe:** I think it would.

**Rebecca:** Knowing she can't do anything about it? You're almost, as a parent, quite helpless I think. Or, she would go completely the other way and she'd end up kicking off and going up to the school and you don't want that either, do you. So, it's kind of—No I didn't say anything. I just dealt with it myself, really".

Similar to Lucy's apprehensions about her mother's misunderstandings about race(ism) on the grounds of her being white, Rebecca and Joe provide similar reasons for choosing to remain silent about the racism they experienced at school. Rebecca and Joe appear to feel the need to protect their mother from their experiences of racist abuse. Rebecca clearly shows her desire for maternal closeness, support, and advice but is hesitant to reach out for fear of upsetting her mother, whom she anticipates would, understandably, want to protect her daughter and be troubled by hearing stories of her vulnerability. The participants' perceptions about their mother's potential inability to address these incidences map on to DiAngelo's (2011, 2018) theorisations of white fragility, which suggest white people are ill-equipped to deal with 'racial stress' compared with people of colour, who are routinely faced with racist triggers that cause them racial discomfort.

Notwithstanding the anxieties that can exist within all parent-child relationships (Phoenix and Brannen 2014), regardless of racialised differences, in Rebecca's urge to protect and preserve her mother's white femininity and her anticipation for the potential of white *fragilities* to surface, we see how race can become plausibly denied and silenced within family settings (Ware 1992; Phipps 2020; Wekker 2016). Rebecca and Joe's feelings of protection suggest that even mixed-race family relationships can unwittingly protect and reproduce hegemonic whiteness. These intimate negotiations are demonstrations of Stuart Hall's (1986) contention concerning the power of both race and hegemony in its capacity to win through the collaboration of those it will routinely subordinate.

For those participants in our studies who made the decision to directly challenge racism within the family, this was not without consequence. Maya, 27 (Study A), describes how race talk between family members could take place online. She shares how her small acts of resistance to the racist content posted by extended white family members on their Facebook accounts was met with hostility by her close family members.

"That [ . . . ] cousin, her brother's wife is always posting like Britain First<sup>5</sup> stuff on Facebook and stuff. So . . . recently I had this big rant and [ . . . ] I deleted her and I put up this status saying, 'I'm sick of my racist family, I'm not entertaining it anymore.' And all my close family like my brother and that got involved, like it all kicked off. Like my mom saying, 'oh why are you ostracising the family?' Like, 'why are you cutting yourself off from them?' [ . . . ] Now I've said I don't wanna hear racism anymore, now suddenly I'm the one that's separate . . . I'm

segregating myself . . . ‘Maya hates white people’. It’s like, that’s not fair really (laughs), *come on* [ . . . ] They have this perception that I’m like anti-white now, I don’t know”.

Maya’s narration of rejecting racism perpetuated by family members illustrates Audre Lorde’s (1981) and Brittany Cooper’s (2018) conceptualisation of how frequently Black women’s anger is met with demands for civility and respectability. Rather than having her feelings validated by her close family, Maya is encouraged to curtail her anger toward an accepted passivity about the racism she witnesses. Further to this, Maya describes how her white mother and (Mixed white/Asian) brother conceptualised her rejection of racism as evidence of her being ‘anti-white’. Her family’s comments demonstrate how a ‘culture of racial equivalence’ has become an acceptable frame in contemporary British society (Song 2014). Maya is essentially charged with ‘reverse racism’ by her family, which suggests she is on an equal footing with the white family members she is calling out on their racism. Ironically, Maya’s outward rejection of the white supremacist logic being expressed by her family is seen as a threat to the integrity of the family, whereas the perpetrators of the more harmful (racist) attitudes are protected, defended and excused. In examples such as this, we see the consequences of challenging racism within the intimate confines of the family and the emotional labour that Black mixed-race people must expense to navigate such close proximity to internal family racism.

## 9. Conclusions

By centring accounts of Black mixed-race perceptions of whiteness in the family, this article complicates some of the taken-for-granted perceptions about mixedness as a condition for post-racial futures and mixed families as evidence of a transition toward post-race societies. Rather, as we have shown, mixed-race families can, in fact, provide a unique vantage point from which to trace how race(isms) can structure even the most intimate relationships. Evidently, relatedness is not an antidote to hegemonic whiteness or a remedy for racism. Notwithstanding the countless examples in existing studies of the racial literacies that can exist within mixed-race family relationships, we suggest these are not exhaustive, and incidences of racial *illiteracies* in mixed families warrant further analysis. Our focus on whiteness, in particular, has complicated common-sense understandings about the presence of race within mixed family settings that can tend to centre upon mixed-racedness, Blackness, and ‘visible’ racial difference. As we have shown, whiteness is not an ‘empty category’ but a governing force within mixed families which needs further interrogation within mixed-race studies (Britton 2013, p. 1314).

In some examples, whiteness within the family caused explicit harm to the participants. These overt examples of racism and rejection were particularly poignant and were shown to have transformative impacts on identity formation and feelings of belonging in the family. In these incidences, the family was articulated as an unsafe space, a hostile site, and the participants’ mixed-racedness was made marginal. Alongside these explicit examples of racism, we tended to find that whiteness in the family could operate as an ever-present, non-presence in the participants’ family lives. The article shows that in these more mundane moments, hegemonic whiteness could flourish and reproduce, precisely because it fell under the radar within the quotidian routines of family life. For instance, we found that white parents (and extended family members) could query the participants’ Black aesthetic, including hair styling and fashion, or undermine (and thereby erase) their experiences of racism. These encounters were often articulated as normative aspects of family life and unintentional slippages, which could go unchallenged as a result. In these examples, a culture of silence could manifest around race talk in the family, thus limiting the possibility for mixed-race families to become sites for contesting and challenging hegemonic whiteness.

Given that these racial *illiteracies* often coexisted with unconditional love, familiarity, and closeness, we found that our participants often struggled to comprehend why these racial *illiteracies* occurred, how they might challenge them, and what the consequences of confrontation might be for their relationships. These findings indicate the emotional labour

that is required on the part of Black mixed-race people to manage their own feelings of discomfort that can arise from such racial *illiteracies* but also those of their white family members. Collectively, our two studies suggest that some Black mixed-race people can end up working a double shift when it comes to race(ism). To put it simply, difficulties around race-related issues could become both a private and public concern for the participants in the studies.

Much of what we know about mixed-race families, Black or otherwise, is constructed in the mind's eye of white parents, which risks skewing our insights into the inner workings of race, difference, and identity that can occur in familial settings. Our findings warn against the centring of white perspectives and affective experiences in the literature, which might, unwittingly, work to reproduce white frameworks and understandings that reinforce hegemonic whiteness in the process. Future research could take heed of these critiques by broadening the unit analysis so that a wider range of family perspectives on how whiteness plays out in family life is foreground and by bringing concepts from whiteness studies into conversation with critical mixed-race studies. In doing so, we might seek to develop critical approaches that bring the full weight of whiteness as a governing force into view.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For instance, out of all the four mixed ethnic groups (the other three being Mixed White and Black African, Mixed White and Asian and Mixed Other), the Mixed White and Black Caribbean group are the most likely to be unemployed and the least likely to be in managerial and professional occupations (Bradford 2006). At school they are vulnerable to low teacher expectations, experience low attainment, and are over-represented in school exclusions (Campion and Joseph-Salisbury 2021; Tikly et al. 2004; Haynes et al. 2006; Caballero et al. 2008; Lewis and Demie 2019; see also: Mohdin 2021).
- <sup>2</sup> See Christian (2008) and Edwards and Caballero (2011) for historical context to understand how white working-class women known to be involved or associated with Black and brown men have often been regarded as immoral, vulgar, sexually deviant, and a threat to the nation's white racial stock in Britain (Christian 2008; Edwards and Caballero 2011).
- <sup>3</sup> Fifty-three percent of the city's population identifies as 'White British' as of the 2011 census. File available from Birmingham City Council website page. 'Census 2011 KS201' Available online: [https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/4576/census\\_2011\\_ks201\\_ethnic\\_groupspdf](https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/downloads/file/4576/census_2011_ks201_ethnic_groupspdf) (accessed on 3 June 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> See, 'Has neighbourhood ethnic segregation decreased?' <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/code/briefingsupdated/has-neighbourhood-ethnic-segregation-decreased.pdf> (accessed on 27 November 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> Far-right fascist political party in the UK.

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