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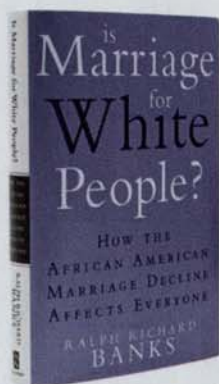
Dating Beyond the Color Line

BY DEMETRIA L. LUCAS

Black women and relationships. *Sigh*. It's the topic no one wants to discuss but everyone is talking about. And that includes Ralph Richard Banks, a Stanford Law School professor and author of *Is Marriage for White People?* (Dutton). Ignore the cringeworthy title that harkens back to that *Washington Post* story of a schoolteacher and her 12-year-old student's surprising declaration. And don't think this is yet another book from a pseudo-social scientist advising Black women to lower their expectations or jump through clichéd hoops to get (and keep) a man. What attracted us to Banks's controversial book was the brilliant social research, solid statistics and sympathetic—not finger-pointing—tone he takes. With determination (not desperation), he proposes that it's time for Black women to reconsider our undying loyalty to dating and marrying Black men exclusively. For the record, Banks is Black. And, yes, so is his wife. But he knows that combination is growing less common every day. "You have a host of Black women who are more successful than ever. But then there is this one area where all is not well: relationships. Your actions are fairly limited as long as you're confined to successful Black men," says Banks. "There's not a whole lot of them but there's a whole lot of you." Sounds harsh? He believes that the dating reality of Black women is. Here ESSENCE offers an enlightening excerpt from Banks's book, a revealing one-on-one with the author and a look into the lives of four interracial couples. If you've never considered dating "out" before, this could be the moment that changes your love life. >

The Relationship Market

In this excerpt from **Ralph Richard Banks's** controversial new book, the author urges Black women to consider crossing the color line for practical reasons



During the past half century, African-Americans have become the most unmarried people in this nation. By far. Although the African-American marriage decline is especially pronounced among the poor, it is apparent as well among the middle class and

affluent. Forty-year-old college-educated Black women are more than twice as likely as their White counterparts not to have married.

Among men, higher earnings are associated with a greater likelihood of marriage. Yet Black men in their late thirties who earn more than \$100,000 a year are more than twice as likely as their White peers never to have married. These high-earning Black men are even less likely to have married than Black men who earn substantially less.

THE MARKET

Successful black men in particular benefit from a relationship market in which they are in short supply. The surfeit of Black women makes it enticing to remain single.

Even if a man decides to marry, the variety of women he has enjoyed may nurture an unrealistic standard. I know men who expect in a wife some combination of the best of all the women they have dated. Although a natural consequence of the relationship market, such a sense of entitlement makes a relationship with any woman difficult. There is a popular discourse about whether Black women are too picky, but from all that I have seen, it is Black men, particularly sought-after and successful Black men, who are pickiest of all.

The numbers imbalance gives Black men the power to dictate the terms of their relationships with Black women. They tend to use that power to establish relationships that are intimate but not committed, that entail sex but not marriage and that offer benefits without responsibilities.

BEYOND RACE?

Some people think that black women have few options, and offer the results of Internet dating research as confirmation of that view. One study on the OkCupid Web site, for example, found that black women send the most messages and receive the fewest replies of any group, and that white men write back to black women 25 percent less frequently than they should based on the compatibility scores the Web site calculates.

But fixating on that finding underestimates Black women's prospects in an

cal minority. They constitute only 13 percent of the female population, and non-Black men roughly 87 percent of the male population. Black women thus confront no shortage of non-Black partners. In fact, there are two or three times as many non-Black men willing to date Black women as there are Black women.

THE PARADOX

Yet many black women remain hesitant to look for love across the color line, in part because they are concerned about the race. And at the center of concerns about the race are Black men. Black men struggle. We lack jobs, we lack education. We fill the prisons.

Black women witness these struggles by men who could be their brothers. Many of these women do not want to abandon Black men. As these women succeed, they want to help. Even in their intimate relationships, they want to lift as they climb.

And those Black men who surmount the obstacles that overwhelm others? Well, they inspire admiration and Black women want them even more. So Black women remain with Black men. They are perhaps among the most loyal groups of women in the world.

Some imagine that by

allying themselves with Black men they bolster the race.

But here's the rub: The same scarcity that is a mark of Black men's disadvantage is also a source of power. The central fact shaping the relationships of Black men and women is the numbers imbalance. Because Black men, successful ones in particular, are scarce and Black women are not, >



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”

integrated relationship market. In that same OkCupid study, Latino, Middle Eastern, Indian and Native American men all responded to Black women at rates substantially higher than did White men. In fact, some of these groups of men responded to Black women at higher rates than did Black men!

What it is also essential to remember is that Black women are a numeri-

Black men wield greater power as they negotiate relationships with Black women. As a result, we have fewer enduring and committed relationships than any other group.

Some Black women respond by redoubling their commitment to Black men. They hope to build a strong Black family, to bolster the Black community, to rebut lingering accusations of racial inferiority. One of the women I interviewed captures the sentiment of many: "If I love black men, then I need to love a black man."

But the strategy hasn't worked so well. We remain unmarried, at odds with each other, our relationships crippled by a distrust that can only be described as extraordinary. More, the "stand by the Black man" approach may worsen the very problem it is intended to solve. To the extent that the problems of the Black family stem from the numbers imbalance, Black women's commitment to Black men may undermine the Black family that women hope to salvage. The more that Black women limit themselves to Black men, the more power Black men gain.

So what would happen if more women opened themselves to a relationship with a man outside of the race? As Black women date and marry men of other races, the numbers imbalance among single African-Americans would diminish. And as the imbalance shifts, so, too, does the power.

Hence, the paradox at the heart of the story: If more Black women married non-Black men, more Black men and women might marry each other. If Black women don't marry because they have too few options, and some Black men because they have too many, then Black women, by opening themselves to interracial marriage, could address both problems at once. For Black women, interracial marriage doesn't abandon the race, it serves the race.

From Is Marriage for White People? by Ralph Richard Banks. This excerpt has been edited and portions paraphrased for clarity; ellipses have not been used to show omitted text. Published by arrangement with Dutton, a member of Penguin Group (USA), Inc. Copyright © 2011 by Ralph Richard Banks.



"People have their preferences, but with love you have to open yourself up," says Danielle.

Shades of Love

Four couples detail the joys and frustrations of interracial dating **BY BENÉ VIERA**

THE NEWLYWEDS

Married more than a month and living in Rockaway, New Jersey, DANIELLE, 28, is Black-Puerto Rican and ADAM, 31, is Polish.

How they met:

Adam: It was a chance encounter. On one of the first days of my clerkship at a law firm I caught sight of a fellow clerk who was this stunning woman.

Danielle: A year later we were both at a dance sponsored by the Latin American Law Society. We talked and danced salsa and merengue. By the end of the year we were dating.

Was race a factor?

Danielle: It was a natural gravitation. We kept running into each other.

Adam: It's really about finding that person that you really connect with.

How their families reacted:

Danielle: My parents have always told me, "As long as the guy treats you right, that's the most important thing to us." We're really blessed to have family and friends that accept our relationship. A couple can be strong internally, but there may be problems to deal with in terms of strangers. You need to have the support of people close to you.

Adam: My mom loves Danielle even more so than she loves me! She's rushing us to have kids.

What it's like coming from two different cultures:

Adam: It adds another level to our relationship. She's learned to speak and understands more Polish than my own sister. Spanish was my second major in college and I love Puerto Rican cuisine. ▷

LOVE BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

In an eye-opening conversation, professor and author Ralph Richard Banks reveals how interracial dating empowers Black women

ESSENCE: In making the case for why Black women should date out, you had to discuss some uncomfortable truths about Black men, like their insecurities, lack of education and income, and rampant cheating, which is higher among Black professional men than other groups. Was that difficult?

BANKS: Yes, which is probably why the issue hasn't been discussed previously. But it's important to note that there's nothing particular about Black men that makes them more inclined to have multiple women or less inclined to marry. What's different is the circumstance. If we're talking about an upwardly mobile Black man in D.C., attractive, and in good shape, it can't be overstated how many beautiful women with a lot going for them he encounters. It's only natural for him to want the best of these women rolled into one.

ESSENCE: How does dating non-Black men change that circumstance and put us on equal footing with Black men in the dating marketplace?

BANKS: As long as you're talking to that hypothetical guy in D.C., he knows and you know there's not a whole lot of men like him out there. So your actions are fairly limited as long as you're confined to Black men. But if he knows that you're going to expand your horizons, he's going to have to give you a better deal to keep you. Your options outside the relationship determine what happens in it.

ESSENCE: One refrain we hear about single Black professional women is that our standards are too high and we should give working-class Black men a better shot. You say otherwise, that "mixed marriages" as they

ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED

MILANA, 24, and DONG, 34, have been dating for a year in Bloomington, Indiana. She's Black and he's Vietnamese.

How they met:

Dong: Can we say *bar*? I saw her from across the room and said to myself, *I better go jump on that before someone else does!*

Milana: I instantly got butterflies the second I saw him. My heart skipped a beat when he sat down next to me. We've been inseparable since.

What led you to date someone of another race?

Dong: I've been dating Black women for 10 to 15 years and was once married to a Black woman with whom I have a daughter. There's just something really special about Black women. I think they're beautiful.

Milana: My dad was the one Black

man I admired and looked up to. But the other Black men around me weren't like him. I was kind of disappointed. So I started to branch out and search for something that was different, and I found my preference: intelligent, smart, classy Asian guys. They just had the mind-set and family mentality I always wanted as well.

What adversity have you faced?

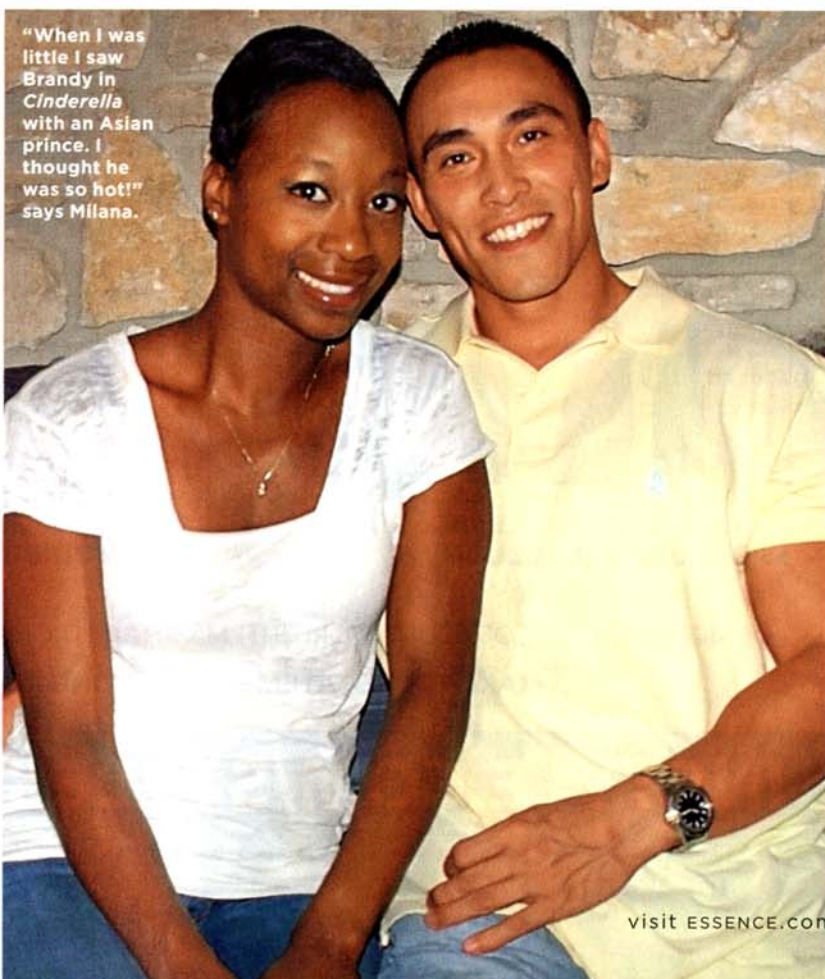
Dong: We live in a pretty diverse town. It's not an issue or a hurdle. People we know say, "You're such a cute couple!"

Milana: I kind of like when people look at us because we're so beautiful.

What advice do you have for women seeking love?

Milana: Open your eyes to new things. Don't be afraid, keep searching, and look for what you want.

Dong: The stereotype about Asian men is not true: We're not all good at math—but I am. >



relate to income and education don't work so well in application. Why not?

BANKS: "Give a blue-collar brother a try" is what I call the Tyler Perry belief. It's misguided advice and it often leads to bad relationships and the high rate of divorce for Black couples. We're the least likely to marry and the most likely to divorce. The reality is, if you're a college-educated Black woman, you have less in common with the guy you grew up with from the neighborhood who's driving the UPS truck and more in common with the White guy who sat next to you in history class in college.

ESSENCE: You debunk the studies in your book, but articles like the *psychologytoday.com* story, "Why Are Black Women Less Physically Attractive Than Other Women?" bring up a hurdle for Black women to get over. Are other races really into us?

BANKS: Yes. I saw that article and it was just ridiculous in so many ways. Black women have a lot of options and are viewed as attractive by non-Black men to a greater extent than people think. Of course there could be White men out there who only want to date you for some exotic adventure. But then there could also be White men out there who want a relationship with you because you share their interests. Both of those can be true.

ESSENCE: How do you suggest Black women, who have always been gung ho for Black men, make this mental shift toward dating out?

BANKS: Imagine you're sitting in a restaurant bar and a Black guy comes up and asks, "Is this seat taken?" You'll think, *He may be hitting on me.* And you'll say something back. If the Latino guy asks, you think he just needs a seat. You don't think, *Maybe he wants to sit near me.* Put race aside and think about what really makes you compatible with someone. And be open to the idea that you may find these qualities in a man who is Iranian or Guatemalan.

ESSENCE: For the Black women who will read your book and say, "I >



WEDDED BLISS

Married for 8 years, CAROL, 34, is Black and RODNEY, 37, is Indian and they're both Trinidadian. The couple have a 6-year-old son and live in Charlotte, North Carolina.

How they met:

Carol: We worked across the street from each other 13 years ago. This was before cell phones, so he gave me his beeper number. As women we're not supposed to be the aggressor, but I beeped him that night anyway. We had dinner and talked for six hours.

Rod: [Laughs] She couldn't resist paging me.

Did you have any apprehensions about dating interracially?

Carol: Yes, due to our Trinidadian culture. Trinidad is about 50 percent Black and 50 percent Indian. It's taboo to see Black and Indian couples in Trinidad.

Rod: Being Indian, the Hindu culture is very dominant and people believe

you should stick to your own. But after one date, we hugged each other and it's hard to describe how emotional I felt. But that's when I knew she was The One.

What adversity have you faced as an interracial couple?

Carol: A lot of older Indian women won't acknowledge me if I'm with my husband, or they stare with a look like, *She got one of our own!* And I will never forget the day I was called a maid by a White woman in the post office while holding my baby. Our 6-year-old son's identity is our biggest hurdle. People already ask, "What is he?" Some kids won't play with him because he looks different.

Rod: Race consciousness is very much alive for children.

What advice do you have for women seeking love?

Carol: You have to let that guard down. It's not about color, it's not about creed, it doesn't have a race. It's love. >

hear you, but I still want a Black man!" or they dream of being a Black power couple like the Cosbys or the Obamas, what are they facing?

BANKS: Everybody wants to have a Barack of their own, but there are only so many to go around. Twice as many Black women graduate from college every year as Black men. If you're a college-educated Black woman and you're going to be with a Black man, most of you will be with men who are not doing well, who are less educated and earning less than you.

ESSENCE: Your research found that Black people are more likely to think they have to be financially "stable" before marriage, as opposed to using marriage to gain stability. There is also a study that asserts Black women are more concerned about a man's earnings than other groups of women. Is money everything?

BANKS: Everyone's concerned about money, not just Black women. But Black women tend to have a more precarious situation. It's unlikely there are in-laws to help you out and you won't have the same financial cushion as other groups. If you don't have a lot of money in the bank, you want someone who is bringing something to the relationship financially. It's an understandable desire.

ESSENCE: You go to great lengths to point out that the issues Black women are facing in relationships aren't unique to us, that this is an American problem. How so?

BANKS: The issues you see Black Americans facing are more exaggerated expressions of the trends that shape the rest of society. The key is understanding that Black people are not deviant or pathological. There's nothing wrong with us. It's that our circumstances have led to extreme developments among African-Americans, but those same circumstances are reshaping life for everyone. If White women want to understand what's happening in their own world, they need to understand what's happening with Black women now.

ENGAGED

CHRISTY, 27, and PETE, 26, have been together 2 years and have a 7-month-old daughter. She's Black, he's Caucasian, and they live in Nashville.

How they met:

Christy: I was a waitress and he came in with his family for Easter Sunday. I paid my coworker five bucks to get his number for me. We started talking and a week later we were official. Best five bucks I ever spent.

Pete: I could just tell she was different than other girls. It was the small things she would do. She wasn't all about herself.

Did you have any apprehensions about dating interracially?

Christy: I've been attracted to White men since I was 9. I used to watch *The X-Files* and had a crush on [Fox] Mulder [played by David Duchovny]. My mom always knew I would bring home White guys when I got older.

Pete: I've only dated Black women. I'm not really attracted to White women. I grew up around mostly Black people.

What adversity have you faced?

Christy: When I started dating Pete, the Black guys at my job were pretty mad at me. They had been trying to talk to me before he and I got together. I wasn't interested, so maybe they felt like I betrayed them or something.

Pete: White girls look at us funny like, *Why her?* Black guys say, "You don't know what to do with that." I just laugh. It doesn't bother me at all because I got what I want and I'm happy.

Christy: That's only a select few. Many people smile when they see us.

Would you recommend Black women date outside their race?

Christy: I encourage my Black girlfriends not to put themselves in a box. You don't want to miss the blessing of finding true love.

"We completely forget each other's races until somebody reminds us," says Peter.

