

Article

The Dating Dupe —The Limits of Biosocially Unfriendly Sociology

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A review of *The Dating Divide: Race and Desire in the Era of Online Romance*, by Celeste Vaughan Curington, Jennifer H. Lundquist, and Ken-Hou Lin. University of California Press, 2021.

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Abstract: Curington, Lundquist, and Lin's book, *The Dating Divide: Race and Desire in the Era of Online Romance*, demonstrates the limits of a moralizing sociological approach to courting behavior shorn of biosocial insight. In this essay, I summarize the book's central findings and claims regarding the roots of systematic, racially exclusionary patterns in online dating. I question the adequacy of their social constructionist, power analytic explanation of such patterns; and I suggest additional interpretations from a multidimensional, biosocial perspective. I argue that reducing dating discrimination to "racism," based on a totally constructed view of romantic desire, is both scientifically and politically shortsighted in today's polarized ideological environment.

Keywords: online dating; racism; biosociology; evolutionary psychology; genetic similarity theory; cultural capital

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"He said some things are really best left unspoken, but I prefer it all to be out in the open."

—Billy Bragg, *Sexuality*

Should we think of our dating choices as political decisions? Do our feelings of attraction to potential mates spring from systems of racial power and marginalization? And if so, should they be subject to moral scrutiny?

Sociologists Curington, Lundquist, and Lin (CLL) think so. The authors of the provocative recent book, *The Dating Divide*, remind readers that "the personal is political" after all. "One's preferences for White partners," they write, "are not so innocent as

preferences for anchovies or avocados.” Indeed, racial choices in dating may appear as benign or “merely personal.” Yet such “narratives of personal choice” have long obscured “prejudice, fear, and desires for segregation.” In the end, our intimate preferences amount to “complicity” in a system of “digital-sexual racism marked by white privilege.”

Reference to “white privilege” is not incidental. It is a central finding in their study of the online dating market. CLL examine more than a million profiles and interactions (daters’ choices of whom to message and respond to) from a major online dating site in the United States, supplemented with seventy-seven in-depth interviews with diverse daters. The results, they lament, are “sobering.” Race turns out to be the decisive predictor of whom people choose as romantic partners, in fact the leading predictor among White daters, beyond such traditional desiderata as educational background, height, and body type. And despite public approval of interracial marriage skyrocketing in recent decades, actual rates of such marriage are quite low (at a little over 6%).¹

With myriad threads and a few dozen tables, I’ll limit my focus here to the central findings among heterosexual daters:

- White males are statistically the most desired by all reported racial groups (Whites, Latinos, Blacks, and Asians). Contradicting the “homophily” theory of within-race preference, non-White females tend to prefer White men as prospective dates over their own racial group.
- White women are not as universally sought as White men. Here the results confirm homophily, as all non-White groups prefer dating women of their own racial group over White women.
- Black daters tend to be excluded the most by all non-Black groups; they are rated as less attractive and are generally the least likely to receive messages or responses from other racial groups. They face, hence, “the unique disadvantage,” akin to what the authors call “romantic apartheid.”
- White women exclude Asian men more than White men exclude Asian women. White men exclude Black women more than White women exclude Black men.
- Latino men prefer Latina women the most, followed by White and Asian women about evenly; Latina women prefer White men the most, followed by Latino and Asian men about evenly. Both tend more often to ignore Blacks.

Again, the authors reveal data far richer than I can present here, including attention to multiracial and lesbian and gay daters. Moreover, their interviews convey the pain and frustration of exclusion, especially among Blacks. Many daters have a poignant story to tell, as they anxiously navigate cultural expectations in an online dating market that denigrates them in one way or the other (e.g., the “hypersexualization” of Black men and Latina women; the “erasure” of Black women’s femininity; the “demasculinization” of Asian men; the “fetishization” of Asian women). Jose, for example, bemoans rejections linked to not living up to the suave dancing, “Latin lover” image. J. T. Tran evokes the “deep shame” Asian men feel before emasculating cultural stereotypes of asexuality and small genitals. And Deborah and Keisha express the angst of “dating while Black.” Ignored again and again by prospective matches, and yet occasionally messaged by men who openly express a prurient interest in a short-term “chocolate” lover or “sex goddess.” Hence, even when they get attention from Whites, many Black and Brown daters discover

¹ The authors (2021, 7) cite a figure of 6.3%, which following Census categories does not include Hispanic/White unions. With such unions included, the intermarriage rates add up to 17%.

they're not often favored for visits to mom and dad. Professedly progressive White daters may talk a fair game about racial equality, yet their dating choices in practice reveal predictable patterns of exclusion.

Rich Results, Impoverished Explanations

The findings above may indeed disturb those committed to a vision of a colorblind, romantic future. By focusing on what people do, rather than what they merely say, CLL interrogate the façade of self-presentation (if not self-deception), and speak to deeper patterns of human behavior whose roots are often left unexamined. The authors should be commended for their ambitious project and data.

Regrettably, however, when shifting from description to explanation, CLL founder on the limits of a sociological approach allergic to serious engagement with biology. In attempting to account for *why* daters have the preferences they do, they repeatedly turn to cultural determinist or “blank slate” explanations, what evolutionary-minded thinkers dub the “standard social science model.” This is the idea that people’s behavior is strictly determined by socialization. For CLL, daters’ racially exclusive choices fundamentally reflect learned social “scripts,” “stereotypes,” “controlling images,” and the like, all reproduced within the wider historical drama of race-gender-power relations in the United States. There is a thin view of agency here, particularly regarding romantic choices that just might make sense from the standpoint of evolved preferences. (The single footnote in the book making passing reference to David Buss and evolutionary approaches to mating is revealing.)

This is not to suggest that historical explanations or power analyses are wrong. They’re just one-sided (more on this below). And nor is it the case that CLL ignore daters’ preferences for certain physical characteristics. They do, in fact, include them in their quantitative analyses. Yet they include them as just that: predictor variables (in their statistical models) that are left untheorized and unintegrated with their otherwise systematic attention to the role of power relations in shaping romantic choice. In sum, CLL’s lack of a biosocial approach leads to all manner of ad hoc (and often unconvincing) socialization arguments, especially when their findings contradict the expectations of a strictly power-based paradigm.

I will provide some examples below. But first it is important to note that the problem with their analysis begins with the conflation of two separate arguments: one unobjectionable, but largely self-evident (let us say, Argument A); and the other provocative, but dubious (Argument B).

Here are the arguments succinctly put for ease of discussion:

- Argument A: People’s discriminatory dating choices help reproduce race-gender hierarchies in society.
- Argument B: People’s romantic desires, which underpin their discriminatory dating choices, spring from ideologically reinforced race-gender hierarchies.

CLL vacillate in the book between each claim, sometimes in the very same sentence. Here is how they declare the purpose of their study in the Introduction: “Our aim is to call into question the naive views that intimate racial preferences are natural, apolitical, and inconsequential.” Note the gulf in explanatory ambition between the claims. Rejecting the view that racial preferences are “inconsequential” is hardly the same as denying, tout court, that they are natural.

Argument A is clear-cut and undeniable. We are informed, for example, that “whom we decide to pursue personal relationships with, be it marriage or a brief encounter at a party, is one of the last visible threads sustaining the racial hierarchy.” By the same token, many daters tell CLL they feel more comfortable pursuing relationships with members of their own race and culture. The authors aver, however, that such a “default” preference “does not alter the fact that racial avoidance ... generates and sustains multiple forms of racial inequality in the contemporary United States.”

Who could argue with these formulations? White people have, of course, far more wealth on average than Black and Brown people. Racial groups continue to de facto segregate by neighborhood, school system, etc. To the extent that such groups do not pair-bond across racial lines, disparities in access to socially valued resources are abetted. CLL situate this reality forcefully in the wider history of race relations in the United States. In the case of Blacks, White “fear and loathing” of “intermixing” has, plainly, deep roots. It was visible in colonial era prohibitions and subsequently institutionalized through hundreds of years of anti-miscegenation laws. CLL write cogently on the history of sexual policing by race, particularly the policing of White women’s relations with Black men. Such unions were especially threatening to the plantation economy; and after emancipation Black men, increasingly constructed as hypersexual and predatory, faced decades of lynching and castration. The details of CLL’s overview of this wrenching history exceed our scope. Yet the relevant takeaway is that today’s racialized dating choices cannot be cleanly separated from this sordid history of sexual segregation.

I wholly concur. It would be absurd to deny the historical association between propertied interest and racial animus. Such animus persists in society today as well, of course, as does the role of socioeconomic status in many people’s mate calculus. Yet does acknowledging these facts commit us to Argument B above? Must we affirm that people’s most intimate desires spring from their (historically inherited) power positions within social hierarchies?

I argue that CLL severely overplay a good hand by disavowing evolutionary insight. Here we get to the nub of the central weakness of the book. Whether out of ignorance or aversion to evolutionary theory (or both), the authors never seriously entertain how patterns in people’s sexual tastes may have biological as well as social roots.

Consider a few of their many Argument B pronouncements:

- “Although the state’s oversight receded with the rollback of laws about marriage and reproductive matters in this period, our innermost preferences were imprinted with the sexual-racial hierarchy.”
- “The privilege of Whiteness shapes cultural notions of beauty and attractiveness. People of color do not have the same power to impose their standards on society as a whole.”
- “If we can acknowledge that race is a social construct, we cannot deny that the categories of desire are *also* socially constructed” (emphasis theirs).
- “Centuries of racial division and oppression inescapably shape our notions of sexual desirability.”

I invite the reader to reflect on these claims and consider some questions: If our desires are “imprinted” by the sexual-racial hierarchy, why are most people homophilic (inclined to same-race partners) in their dating preferences? Recall that all men in CLL’s database favor women of their own racial group. Might racial homophily speak to deep-seated, human instincts? Or must our romantic desires be “socially constructed” all the way down? Presumably the authors would not affirm as much regarding the roots of homosexual

attraction (?). There is, after all, an emerging consensus among scientists today regarding the biological determinants of sexual orientation,² even among sociologists.³

If our intimate desires are “inescapably shaped” by racial divisions, does this mean that power relations determine our feelings of attraction? That seems to be what the authors mean by asserting that people of color lack the power to “impose” their beauty standards on society. But if power within social hierarchies determines desirability, wouldn’t Black men be less desired than Black women, as the latter increasingly have better employment and educational outcomes?⁴ We see the opposite to be the case. Wouldn’t Asian men be desired more than Asian women, as the former have more resources today than White men?⁵ A fortiori, wouldn’t White women prefer Asian to Latino men? Again we see the opposite trends. I suggest that we cannot begin to make sense of dating patterns without integrating analyses of power and socialization with people’s evolved preferences. Sociology and biology need to renew their courtship, with an eye to wedlock.

Controlling Stereotypes, Programmed Preferences

The picture of the online dater that emerges in CLL’s analyses is of the dating dupe. The dating dupe has no instinctual preferences of their own, certainly none that are rooted in a tribal human nature. On the contrary, their choices are fundamentally learned or internalized. Whenever CLL encounter dating choices that disturb them, they leap to “internalized stereotypes,” “controlling images,” “enacted scripts,” and so on. Never do the authors pause to ask if such cultural stereotypes could be even partially true; or if it is accurate or helpful, given their progressive political aims, to tag people’s particular dating choices as “racist” or “pathological.”

Here are a handful of countless examples:

- Latino men are subject to “stereotypes” about “machismo” or “womanizing,” and “controlling stereotypes” about their “height” and “perceived illegality.”
- Many Black women “respond to White men’s messages more,” suggesting that they “buy into the White male cultural ideal.”
- Black men and Asian women are more than twice as likely as Black women and Asian men to outmarry. “Controlling images” may be “driving these trends,” or “pathologized notions of desirability and ideals of masculinity and femininity.”

The authors’ reflection upon hearing many Latina daters express a preference for White men, whom they perceive as less macho and controlling than Latino men, merits a full citation:

We find it curious, however, that Latina women would view White men as gender progressive, given that sexism operates across racial and ethnic groups. None of our Latina participants indicated that other non-Latino men, such as Asians or Blacks,

² Bailey, J. M., Vasey, P. L., Diamond, L. M., Breedlove, S. M., Vilain, E., & Epprecht, M. (2016). Sexual orientation, controversy, and science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 17(2): 45–101.

³ Horowitz, M., Yaworsky, W., & Kickham, K. (2014). Whither the blank slate? A report on the reception of evolutionary biological ideas among sociological theorists. *Sociological Spectrum*, 34(6): 489–509.

⁴ Asante-Muhamed, D., Kamra, E., & Sanchez, C. (2022). Racial wealth snapshot: Women, men, and racial wealth divide. National Community Reinvestment Coalition. [link to the article](#).

⁵ Ibid.

were suitably gender-egalitarian alternatives. In this sense Latina women's framing of White men as particularly desirable also tacitly reinforces a race-class-gender system that promotes White masculinity and subordinates Latino and other non-White masculinities.

It is difficult to read passage after passage like these in the book without suspecting a sense of paternalism among the authors. Daters, after all, don't know any better about their mating choices. They are duped into a host of stereotypes, bolstered by media and other elites. Black daters are least desired because people have "internalized the regulatory gaze of antimiscegenation." Asian men are less desired because of the "prevalence of controlling images of Asian men as 'effeminate' and 'nerdy.'" Latinas merely perceive White men as more egalitarian. CLL know better (without concerning themselves, however, to examine the question empirically).⁶

The most troubling sign of the authors' paternalism throughout the book is their moralizing tone. Here the dating dupe turns deceptive. CLL encounter quite a few Asian women who, like many Latinas, prefer what they see as typically egalitarian and chivalrous cultural inclinations among White men. For the authors, however, when marginalized women express this preference, they "collude with and participate in controlling images," and "leverage racialized gender stereotypes to justify romantic preferences for Whites over coethnic men." The judgmental language here is hard to miss. Asian and Latina women "collude with" and "leverage" stereotypes? And to what tribunal must they "justify" their romantic preferences?

White people are even less free of sin. As I note at the start of the essay, CLL observe with dismay how even the most racially aware White progressives (especially women), rarely date across the color line. "This may be attributable to patriarchal and gendered family norms," they opine, "or it might be a convenient excuse to avoid admitting to sexual racism."

Lest they unduly chastise, CLL reassure the reader that we are not fully to blame for our romantic tastes. Our "complicity" in "sexual racism" is "undeniable," they reiterate, but given that we are products of the racist patriarchy, it "may not be our fault directly if we have a racial preference." In some cases, "individual racism" may play only a "little part" in our romantic choices.

I'll leave it to the reader if that offers any solace.

The Faultfinding Left Meets the Alt-Right

The irony of the book is that it gives the alt-right the most cause to celebrate. After all, the race realist would simply flip the script: "I told you race runs deep in the bones," they would claim. "Enough of this claptrap about multiracial romance. People in practice prefer their own." This is to say, the alt-right agrees wholeheartedly with CLL that racial preferences lurk beneath our intimate decisions. They just reduce such preferences to biology.

⁶ If I can indulge, briefly, in an autobiographical aside: I am a White man, who was married for 18 years to a woman of Mexican origin, whom I met while carrying out my dissertation research on the struggles of factory workers along the US-Mexico border. She often expressed gratitude during our engagement for the freedom she had to work as many hours as she wanted, socialize with friends as she wished, etc., things she said she couldn't do with her Mexican partners. I obviously do not intend this anecdote to be valid grounds to generalize. Yet were I to do so, I would reveal the same disinterest in getting to the truth behind the stereotype as the authors.

There is no need for such pessimism. Neither sociological nor biological reductionism is warranted. When we appreciate that human beings are coevolving both biologically and culturally, we see that both instincts and society interact in shaping our preferences. The point may seem trite in this context, but not its political implications. Would CLL be as strident in their accusations of daters' so-called "racism" if they considered their preferences partly innate? (The words "racist" and "racism," I might add, appear 200 times in a book of 320 pages.) An analogy to gay rights is apt. Gay activists have long affirmed that the search for "gay genes" is irrelevant, as society should welcome diverse forms of sexual intimacy. Although progressives agree, it is naive not to recognize that people's emergent understanding of the biological roots of homosexuality played a role in nudging more conservative elements of society toward acceptance. If acknowledging biology softened conservatives' antigay animus, might it do the same for liberals' aversion to racial dating preferences?

CLL will have none of it, however. References to our biological nature are little more to them than rationalizations, concealing nefarious socially constructed feelings. Daters repeatedly admit their personal choices and feelings of attraction (e.g., "I'm just not into Asians;" "I'm less into Black people when it comes to relationships"), but for CLL, such "narratives about chemistry or homophily, take existing racial boundaries for granted and rationalize them as natural." Dating preferences "may *feel* as though they are natural" (emphasis theirs), but in fact they "reflect the shameful roots of racism in the United States." "Digital-sexual prejudice," they repeat, "is hidden under the guise of choice."

Despite their shared view on entrenched prejudice, CLL's commitment to "abolishing the dating divide" is the antithesis, of course, to the alt-right's racial separatism. But to advance the vital goal of a flourishing, multiracial society, we must take both nature and society seriously. We need to have an open discussion about deeply sensitive matters, something that is unfortunately perilous today when it comes to the explosive category of race.

Biocultural Considerations

The authors begin their book expressing dismay that, despite strong public approval, actual rates of interracial marriage remain low. Since such assortative mating by race cannot in any way be "natural" in their view, CLL employ the traditional tools of the sociologist: historical and social structural analyses. Yet we must ask again whether people's romantic choices can be explained adequately by stratification and stereotyping. The internet's removal of geographic and related barriers to meeting people hardly inhibited systematic racial sorting online, as the authors discovered. It appears that in matters of race and romance, ethnic affinities run deep.

For good scientific and moral reasons, evolutionary and population geneticists have essentially dispensed with the category of "race," substituting "ancestry" or "population" instead. It is clearly an exciting time in genetics. Surprising discoveries overturn prior theories every few years. In addition to evidence of ancient waves of migration to Europe and back into Africa, the most striking recent news, undoubtedly, is human interbreeding with Neanderthals and Denisovans.⁷ Whatever the complex picture, scientists converge on the view that human populations are genetically distinct in ways that correspond with self-identified race-ethnicity, despite the fact that the vast majority of genetic variation

⁷ Callaway, E. (2016). Evidence mounts for interbreeding bonanza in ancient human species. *Nature*.

is within human populations, not between them.⁸ Indeed, with the mapping of the genome, and increasingly sophisticated computer aided analyses, researchers have discovered statistical clusters of genes among human subjects that correspond to their continental ancestral populations.⁹ Even sociologists, in a leading journal of the American Sociological Association, acknowledge that strictly constructionist accounts of race have to be reformulated in light of recent genetic research.¹⁰ Reacting to the “genomic challenge,” Shiao et al. acknowledge that racial-ethnic categories “have a biological basis in statistically discernable clusters of alleles.”¹¹ To be sure, exploring the genome to potentially predict average behavioral differences based on ancestry is taboo and rife with ethical landmines. Yet research into genetic diseases and susceptibilities (e.g., sickle cell, Tay-Sachs), and differing success rates in organ transplants,¹² continue to prove useful for health outcomes.

I need not delve further into these issues. I will ask, however, to those sympathetic to CLL’s totally constructed view of desire: How probable is it that tens of thousands of years of (mostly) separate geographic evolution between ancestral populations left no mark on mating preferences? From a biopsychosocial standpoint, might people navigate the mating market in ways responsive to wider societal images, cultural affinity and familial expectations, geographic and structural propinquity, etc., *as well as* unconscious instinctual preferences?

I am not going to make a full-throated defense here that racial homophily is (partly) biological. The evidence for such is suggestive and contested, rather than conclusive. I can say, however, that CLL’s a priori dismissal is unjustified. Mountains of research in such fields as evolutionary biology, anthropology, and experimental psychology (implicit bias, realistic conflict, social identity theory), reveal a tribal or ingroup-favoring human being. From an evolutionary standpoint, such feelings make adaptive sense, as those tribes in prehistory with stronger coalitional sentiments would have been more united in prospective conflicts with other groups over resources. It is not surprising, in this light, how easy it is to trigger ingroup/outgroup behavior in minimal groups,¹³ or how unavoidable racial biases are in implicit association tests.¹⁴

Genetic similarity researchers make the most explicit case for biological underpinnings of assortative mating.¹⁵ It has been widely confirmed that married couples tend to be more genetically similar than would be expected by chance. Russell and

⁸ Witherspoon, D. J., Wooding, S., Rogers, A. R., Marchani, E. E., Watkins, W. S., Batzer, M. A., & Jorde, L. B. (2007). Genetic similarities within and between human populations. *Genetics*, 176(1): 351–59.

⁹ Murray, C. (2020). *Human Diversity: The Biology of Gender, Race, and Class*. New York: Twelve, p. 156.

¹⁰ Shiao, J. L., Bode, T., Beyer, A., & Selvig, D. (2012). The genomic challenge to the social construction of race. *Sociological Theory*, 30(2): 67–88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹² Pisavadia, B., Arshad, A., Chappelow, I., Nightingale, P., Anderson, B., Nath, J., & Sharif, A. (2018). Ethnicity matching and outcomes after kidney transplantation in the United Kingdom. *PLoS ONE*, 13(4): e0195038.

¹³ Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*. Cambridge: CUP Archive.

¹⁴ Nosek, B. A., Smyth, F. L., Hansen, J. J., Devos, T., Lindner, N. M., Ranganath, K. A., ... & Banaji, M. R. (2007). Pervasiveness and correlates of implicit attitudes and stereotypes. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 18(1): 36–88.

¹⁵ Rushton, J. P. (1989). Genetic similarity, human altruism, and group selection. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(3): 503–18. Rushton, J. P., Russell, R. J., & Wells, P. A. (1984). Genetic similarity theory: Beyond kin selection. *Behavior Genetics*, 14(3): 179–93. Russell, R. J., Wells, P. A., & Rushton, J. P.

colleagues find that couples' greater genetic similarity extends to dozens of heritable traits, including IQ and personality measures, height, weight, hair color, eye color, and many more.¹⁶ Extending the concept of kin altruism in biology, they suggest that people have evolved unconscious mechanisms to detect others genetically like themselves. Such mechanisms may entail visual, olfactory, or other sensory cues (perhaps even imprinting).¹⁷ Lines of supporting evidence and studies are considerable. Here are just a few: widespread assortative mating in the animal kingdom;¹⁸ people's increased attraction to photos of the opposite sex when their own faces have been morphed into them;¹⁹ and higher fecundity and marital satisfaction among more genetically similar spouses.²⁰

Genetic similarity theory has been widely challenged (see open peer commentaries on Rushton),²¹ and occasionally endorsed.²² Again, I certainly do not cite it as settled science. Yet the picture that emerges when thinking about romantic choice in a multidimensional way is far more promising than limiting analysis to one level.

It should be emphasized that even if mate choice has an instinctual component, this does not mean people's instincts are identical. As entrenched as racial-ethnic homophily appears to be, recent research shows it may be eclipsed by sorting for political orientation.²³ For example, McDermott and colleagues' experiment shows that people prefer the body odors of those who share their political ideology.²⁴ The takeaway from current research in political psychology is that liberals and conservatives systematically differ in kindred psychological traits, such as group loyalty, openness to experience, threat and disgust sensitivity, and conscientiousness.²⁵ Evolutionary thinkers speculate (e.g., Tuschman) that prototypical conservative and liberal traits reflect individual differences in evolved reproductive strategy, with conservatives more inclined to endogamy/xenophobia

(1985). Evidence for genetic similarity detection in human marriage. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 6(3): 183–87.

¹⁶ Russell, R. J., & Wells, P. A. (1991). Personality similarity and quality of marriage. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 12(5): 407–12.

¹⁷ Bereczkei, T., Gyuris, P., Kovacs, P., & Bernath, L. (2002). Homogamy, genetic similarity, and imprinting: Parental influence on mate choice preferences. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 33(5): 677–90.

¹⁸ Jiang, Y., Bolnick, D. I., & Kirkpatrick, M. (2013). Assortative mating in animals. *The American Naturalist*, 181(6): E125–E38.

¹⁹ Penton-Voak, I. S., Perrett, D. I., & Peirce, J. W. (1999). Computer graphic studies of the role of facial similarity in judgements of attractiveness. *Current Psychology*, 18(1): 104–17.

²⁰ Thiessen, D., & Gregg, B. (1980). Human assortative mating and genetic equilibrium: An evolutionary perspective. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 1(2): 111–40. Russell, R. J., & Wells, P. A. (1991). Personality similarity and quality of marriage. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 12(5): 407–12.

²¹ Rushton, J. P. (1989). Genetic similarity, human altruism, and group selection. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 12(3): 503–18. Rushton, in particular, became an infamous figure, roundly condemned for his writings on race. These earlier writings, however, appear in top scientific journals and have been cited widely by leading scholars. It goes without saying, in any event, that the merit of scientific work is not assessed by the repute of its author. Nor should my citations of an author be construed in any way as an endorsement of their broader work or views.

²² Dutton, E. (2011). Towards a scientific model of culture shock and intercultural communication. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 27.

²³ Alford, J. R., Hatemi, P. K., Hibbing, J. R., Martin, N. G., & Eaves, L. J. (2011). The politics of mate choice. *Journal of Politics*, 73(2): 362–79.

²⁴ McDermott, R., Tingley, D., & Hatemi, P. K. (2014). Assortative mating on ideology could operate through olfactory cues. *American Journal of Political Science*, 58(4): 997–1005.

²⁵ Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon. Hibbing, J. R., Smith, K. B., & Alford, J. R. (2013). *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences*. London: Routledge.

and liberals more disposed to exogamy/xenophilia.²⁶ A mix of such tendencies in a population may have helped ensure optimal genetic diversity by avoiding the dangers of excessive outbreeding or inbreeding. Whatever the evolutionary roots, studies confirm comparatively higher racial homophily preference among political conservatives, even in research (preceding CLL) on internet dating.²⁷

Unraveling “Racism” in the Dating Market

I have only scratched the surface above on possible biosocial intricacies of mating behavior. Now I engage CLL’s results more closely to challenge their reduction of dating discrimination to “racism.” Indeed, even if people (especially conservatives) harbor unconscious feelings of comfort toward their own, which sway their romantic desires, this hardly dictates accompanying feelings of racial antipathy or superiority.

Let’s imagine, say, a traditional Greek woman, who for a host of reasons, mostly familial and cultural, seeks a “good” Greek man as a husband; or a Black woman, who having dated across racial lines, prefers above all a Black man in her ideal conception of marriage and family. Are these women “racist?” I certainly agree with CLL that daters should introspect and examine their reasons for any discriminatory choices. But encouraging an open mind, or (rightfully) discouraging the use of racial filters online, is far removed from folding the complexities of daters’ motivations into the blanket charge of bigotry.

As I mentioned above, the authors never pause in the book to consider whether there could be any truth in cultural stereotypes. In fact, they do not dwell on cultural differences very much at all, outside how they have been distorted by historical power relations. Nor do they integrate evolved biology, as we have seen. I will do so here, suggesting hypotheses to supplement CLL’s one-sided, power-analytic approach. For purposes of space, I will focus mostly on Black and White daters. I cannot stress enough that I intend these more as plausible hunches than settled arguments. En route, I will raise significant methodological objections as well.

For CLL, the status of Blacks as least desirable in the dating market is straightforward: historically situated at the bottom rung of the stratification ladder, they are likewise at the bottom rung of the desirability ladder. But might racial attraction entail more than this power dynamic? Do not Black Americans, like all other racial-ethnic groups, share particular cultural characteristics? Moreover, might disproportionate disadvantage in the Black community link to relevant differences in cultural capital?

The issue of cultural differences raises a methodological problem in the book that seriously undercuts, in my view, the authors’ core argument. With over a million online profiles in their database, CLL do not report on daters’ profile narratives; nor do they have access to their photographs. Their statistical models, therefore, are based on daters’ self-identified measures of education, body weight, and height. The crux of CLL’s approach is that when they control for key variables, such as education, race remains a stronger predictor of romantic choice. For instance, even though women

²⁶ Tuschman, A. (2013). *Our Political Nature: The Evolutionary Origins of What Divides Us*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

²⁷ Yancey, G. (2007). Homogamy over the net: Using internet advertisements to discover who interracially dates. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24(6): 913–30. Anderson, A., Goel, S., Huber, G., Malhotra, N., & Watts, D. J. (2014). Political ideology and racial preferences in online dating. *Sociological Science*, 1: 28.

across the board value education in a suitor, educated White women tend to prefer non-college-educated White men over college-educated racial minorities. CLL interpret this as palpable evidence of “digital racism.” Yet it is not difficult to see that differences in cultural interests, vernacular, and outright language barriers associated with ethnicity appear in daters’ profiles and messaging. Is it racist for White women daters to prefer less-educated White men if they enjoy the same television shows, music, food, etc.? Is it racist for them to gravitate toward those to whom they relate linguistically? After all, even educated minorities may not convey the same subtleties of cultural compatibility in their messages. There is clearly a confound here, unless the authors intend to define a preference for cultural affinity itself as racist.

Below is a paragraph from an interracial (Black/White) dater’s online profile that I encountered while preparing this essay. Though she is only one voice, I cite her for her eloquent and nuanced description of the importance of shared cultural interests:

A note to African American men: I've been honest and deliberate in my ethnic preferences. While I am biracial, I grew up in an affluent northern and entirely Caucasian environment. Truthfully, I identify very little with the major canons of African American culture, music, politics and beliefs. In those relationships in which I dated black men, the cultural differences were always too much to overcome. While I appreciate the interest of any ethnicity, I don't care to waste anyone's time, including my own. Short of growing up in an atypical demographic like me or identifying more with country music than hip-hop, etc. It is most likely we will not have enough common interests to sustain a successful relationship. I wish everyone the best of luck on their search!!

One could, of course, interpret this message as the dater’s “internalized hatred” of her biracial identity, or how she “bought into” the White cultural ideal. But could it be that her lived experiences are simply authentic? She reveals, after all, experience dating Black men. Perhaps she struggled to make those relationships work. Must her tastes, such as country music over hip-hop, conceal a latent racial animus? CLL continually remind the reader that our choices are never innocent; that our desires are always suffused by the deep stain of our racist past. But their sociohistorical method cannot assess anyone’s personal motivations. Nor can their quantitative models account for the vital role of cultural affinity.

Differences in cultural capital are, to be sure, a delicate matter. For sociologists, cultural capital is a class/cultural concept. It refers to modes of speech, temperament, knowledge, and taste that are privileged by the dominant culture and facilitate social mobility. A classic example would be success in a job interview due in part to wearing the expected attire, speaking in formal English, conveying signs of worldliness, and so on. Might perceived differences in cultural capital play a role in the exclusionary dating practices CLL discover?

From a sociological standpoint, the link between economic capital and cultural capital is not mysterious. It is plain that within the Black community, for example, material hardship, cumulative anxieties, underfunded schools, and daily indignities of hard and soft bigotry hamper access to cultural capital. That point should not be controversial. But the prospect that daters could factor real divisions in cultural capital into their mating calculus on class-cultural, rather than necessarily “racist” grounds, is lost on the authors. Time and again CLL reduce patterns of Black exclusion to “anti-Black racism” learned in the context of “White supremacy.” The authors cite numerous daters who reveal family pressure not to date Blacks. Among minority daters, CLL suggest, such “romantic gatekeeping” is at

best a way for them to “distance themselves” from “Blackness.” At worst, it is simply an excuse to mask bigotry. “White women invoke familial explanations,” CLL write, “when they are avoiding facing their own personal biases.”

The authors invert terms when describing the preference for White men in the dating market. Here daters have internalized “White male hegemony” and strive to gain “proximity to Whiteness.” As we saw above, CLL are quick to dismiss Asian or Latina daters who cite progressive cultural norms they find more common among White men. Such judgments are mere “stereotypes,” which Asian women daters are especially “complicit” in “leveraging.” But what does it mean for a stereotype to be “leveraged” if it were wholly untrue? For apparently ideological reasons, which I will return to in my concluding remarks, CLL are averse to interrogating the fact that cultural capital is distributed unequally by race. Hence they cannot see many daters’ partiality to White men (or distancing from Black daters) as anything but manifestations of “racialized desire.” Moreover, to conflate daters’ pursuit of material comforts, which White men on average have more privilege to provide, with internalized bigotry of one form or another is an extraordinary reduction. People marry more than a person, the cliché goes, they marry into a family and even a culture. This is not to say that racist sentiments cannot be part of daters’ motivations. Of course they can! But the authors’ consistent treatment of exclusionary dating as reducible to racism is unsubtle and needlessly accusatory.

It appears, in sum, that some combination of anticipated cultural differences and class aspirations play a role in many daters’ exclusionary practices. Yet even these are not the whole story. Let us turn, in conclusion, to the conspicuous role of biology.

The methodological problems in the book persist when we turn to preferred physical characteristics. CLL address what they deem the “conventionally more desirable” traits of body weight and height in their statistical models. Here they find that for White men, body weight is a major “deal breaker.” It even crosses racial lines: White men prefer “average” weight Latinas and Asians to overweight White women. However, while weight trumps race for Latinas and Asians, it does not for Black women. That is, White men reject average weight Black women in favor of fuller-figured White women. For the authors, this is another example of the unique “anti-Blackness” of the dating market.

There are complications to the story, however. The authors’ focus on weight and height is the one space where they address traits traditionally explained by evolutionary theorists. CLL do not couch their discussion in evolutionary terms, however, as they view physical preferences as culturally determined (more on this below). Nonetheless, extensive, cross-cultural research in evolutionary psychology demonstrates men’s universal attraction to certain cues of fertility, such as feminine facial features, clear skin, firm breasts, and a low waist-to-hip ratio (i.e., “hourglass figure”). (See Buss and Schmitt for an overview.)²⁸ For women, the evidence suggests universal preference for taller men with V-shaped torsos (i.e., broad shoulders), as such traits signaled the capacity for protection, physical dominance, and resource acquisition.

Consistent with the evolutionary literature, CLL do, indeed, find that weight and height are major concerns for daters. It is not surprising, in this vein, that online dating research finds systematic lying on precisely these traits, with women consistently underestimating

²⁸ Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (2019). Mate preferences and their behavioral manifestations. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 70: 77–110.

their weight and men consistently overestimating their height.²⁹ This complicates CLL's argument, as they do not have access to data beyond self-report. But assuming that daters across racial groups lie at the same rate, there are still average physical differences between racial groups. Black people tend to be larger than White people (with greater bone density, longer arms and legs), and have a higher obesity rate. Asians, on the other hand, are shorter than both groups and have the lowest obesity rate. Note that the differences in obesity rates are considerable: Blacks (41%); Hispanics (35%); Whites (30%); Asians (11%). As for height, Asians are on average three inches shorter than Whites.³⁰

It is certainly plausible, therefore, that when Black women identify their weight as "average," they do so from the vantage point of their own racial reference group. If so, this muddies the picture and undercuts the charge that White men's rejection of them by body weight is plainly racist. It would be interesting in this light to see whether White men favored overweight White women over Black women who self-identified as "fit," rather than "average." It is not likely the case, however, as the authors would no doubt have reported it.

CLL make the same charge of racism regarding height. Asserting that height "takes a backseat to race," they note that "White women are more willing to date shorter White men than taller minority men." However, their operational definition of shorter men includes men of "similar height" to them as well, which they measure as five centimeters (1.97 inches) shorter or taller than them.³¹ This is a peculiar method to say the least! The charge of "racism" would be much more persuasive if White women commonly preferred White men who are *in fact shorter than them*, over minority men who are taller than them. Preferring White men up to two inches taller than them to even taller minority men hardly demonstrates racism. Notwithstanding this concern, CLL do not hesitate to link White women's height preferences to entrenched "race and desirability hierarchies." In perhaps their most extravagant constructionist claim, they write: "It is not that particular bodies or heights are attractive objectively, but rather embodied attractiveness is often a *product* of racial hierarchy" (emphasis theirs).

CLL's total constructionist, racial hierarchy argument is hard to square with Asian men's pronounced disadvantage in the dating market. While their data reveal that White women prefer Black and Asian men about equally, they note other research showing White women's clear preference for Black over Asian men.³² These findings run counter to the anti-Blackness theme of the book, as well as the authors' emphasis on the racial hierarchy of desire. After all, were desire reducible to social power and privilege, Asian men should top the list of women's preferred suitors. CLL explain the matter, unsurprisingly, by

²⁹ Hancock, J. T., Toma, C., & Ellison, N. (2007, April). The truth about lying in online dating profiles. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, San Jose, CA, USA, 28 April–3 May 2007*. New York: Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 449–52.

³⁰ Gerace, L., Aliprantis, A., Russell, M., Allison, D. B., Buhl, K. M., Wang, J., ... & Heymsfield, S. B. (1994). Skeletal differences between black and white men and their relevance to body composition estimates. *American Journal of Human Biology*, 6(2): 255–62. United Health Foundation. (2020). *America's Health Rankings: 2020 Annual Report*. MedicineNet. (2019). Average heights of men around the world. [link to the article](#).

³¹ Note that the authors do not report their measure of "similar height" in the book. It was obtained via email correspondence with the third author, Dr. Lin, on 16 August 2021.

³² Feliciano, C., Robnett, B., & Komaie, G. (2009). Gendered racial exclusion among white internet daters. *Social Science Research*, 38(1): 39–54. Robnett, B., & Feliciano, C. (2011). Patterns of racial-ethnic exclusion by internet daters. *Social Forces*, 89(3): 807–28.

referring to (axiomatically dismissed) stereotypes of Black masculinity and Asian passivity. But notwithstanding other variables, might Black men actually be on average bigger and more masculine than Asian men, and thus appeal more to White women's physical preferences?

Perish the thought.

Cultural anti-Blackness alone cannot explain the contrast in perceived attractiveness of Black men and women. Indeed, studies have shown that Black men tend to be appraised as more attractive than Black women.³³ In a UK sample, Lewis found, for example, that of Black, White, and Asian faces, Black men's faces tend to be rated as most attractive, followed by White and Asian men; but it is reversed for women's faces, where Asian women are rated the most attractive, followed by White and Black women.³⁴ Similarly, analysis of meta-data in 2009 and 2014 from the dating site, OkCupid, finds that White daters reject Black women more than they do Black men; and that both Black and White men rate Asian women as slightly more attractive than women of their own race.³⁵ Dutton and Lewis propose evolutionary explanations for these disparities in perceived attractiveness, involving prehistoric geography and sexual selection, that need not concern us here. But the role of biological factors in explaining higher outmarriage rates among Black men and Asian women cannot be ignored. Of course, as is their wont, CLL interpret these patterns socially, emphasizing the impact of controlling stereotypes that "masculinize" Black women and "fetishize" Asian women. Yet Asian female faces, especially East Asian, are widely observed as more neotenous—preserving youthful, "cute" features into adulthood, such as larger eyes, a smaller nose, and chin.³⁶ As such signs of youthfulness signal fertility, it is not surprising that they are viewed as more attractive cross-culturally.³⁷ Note, however, that neoteny and smaller stature would not, from an evolutionary point of view, serve as fitness cues for Asian men compared to men from other racial groups.

Concluding Remarks

I have cited in this essay only the thinnest slice of a fascinating and expansive literature in evolutionary human science. Whatever the mysteries of attraction and romance, I have affirmed the value of a multidimensional toolbox to unlock them. Of course, employing that toolbox on questions of racial disparity is a fraught exercise, all the more so if the disparity comprises people's most intimate feelings of worth and desirability.

³³ Lewis, M. B. (2011). Who is the fairest of them all? Race, attractiveness and skin color sexual dimorphism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(2): 159–62.

³⁴ Lewis, M. B. (2012). A facial attractiveness account of gender asymmetries in interracial marriage. *PLoS ONE*, 7(2): e31703.

³⁵ Dutton, E. (2020). *Making Sense of Race*. Washington Summit Publishers, pp. 193–94. The data cited by Dutton contradict CLL's findings, which do not show that Black women are perceived as less attractive than Black men. However, CLL's data confirm Asian women's exceptional attractiveness vis-à-vis other groups. Unreported findings sent to me by Dr. Lin confirm that in their sample, Asian women are perceived as somewhat more attractive than White women, whereas Asian men are perceived as demonstrably less attractive.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁷ Jones, D., Brace, C. L., Jankowiak, W., Laland, K. N., Musselman, L. E., Langlois, J. H., ... & Symons, D. (1995). Sexual selection, physical attractiveness, and facial neoteny: Cross-cultural evidence and implications [and comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology*, 36(5): 723–48. Bashour, M. (2006). History and current concepts in the analysis of facial attractiveness. *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery*, 118(3): 741–56.

I recognize that my review may not be read as especially charitable to Curington, Lundquist, and Lin. Their book unfortunately combines two defects in contemporary sociology: a possibly willful incuriosity about explanations not solely at the level of the social, coupled with a moralistic posture toward their object of study. From their sociology silo, CLL presume that daters' desires are solely socially constructed, while admonishing them for those very desires. Apparently they believe their moral stance is noble – that they will contribute to helping people identify, and hopefully “unlearn,” the pernicious stereotypes that divide us. “We cannot change what we cannot see,” they write. Yet if dating preferences are partly natural, and deeply cultural, it is hard to see how hurling accusations of “racism” is constructive. If online discriminators are “racist,” should we deem daters who disregard physically unattractive people, “lookist”? Should we shame those who filter out heavyset people as “fatphobic”? If a lesbian declines to date trans women, ought we label her “transphobic”?³⁸

These questions are not hyperbole. They tap into deep ambivalence among left/liberal intellectuals, whose egalitarian instincts chafe against natural and social inequalities. I have not inquired with the authors about their politics. But I suspect their progressive, cosmopolitan sensibilities blind them to the possibility that people can care about “race” without necessarily being “racist.” Jonathan Haidt describes cogently how difficult it is for the left to appreciate the valences of group loyalty, or to recognize how fragile diversity is when devoid of a language of shared trust.³⁹ Regrettably, CLL’s language of “digital-sexual racism,” “hidden prejudice,” “complicity,” “White supremacy,” etc., can only exacerbate distrust, at a time when social bonds are sharply frayed along racial and political lines. Subjecting people’s romantic choices to moral scrutiny is sensitive enough. But to do so in an accusatory way, while reducing human desires to reflexes or rationalizations of power and prejudice, is both empirically and politically shortsighted.

While no doubt alienating many readers, *The Dating Divide* will likely resonate among progressives who crave a world where no one—and certainly no group—differs on any socially valued trait; where cultural differences no longer confer disparate rewards; and where beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. But nature makes no leaps. For the time being, we live in a world where biological, cultural, and class differences endure, and in socially consequential ways. We should not deny these differences, nor resign ourselves to them. But if we are genuinely committed to a flourishing, multiracial society, we must honestly strive to understand them.

³⁸ One could easily envision a companion volume to *The Dating Divide* on the marginalization of overweight people. The authors could account for the pervasive exclusion of obese people among online daters (i.e., “digital-sexual fatphobia”), by contextualizing it in the history of stigmatization, denigrating images, etc., in media and society. The point may seem facetious, but without a biologically informed framework, it is difficult to find grounds to disagree.

³⁹ Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Pantheon.