

2 P R E F A C E

3 I N T R O D U C T I O N to *An American Love Story*

6 P R E V I E W

Reading 1: **An American Love Story**

Preview is designed for use immediately before and after watching an episode in the documentary. It provides a variety of activities that can be used individually or in various combinations to widen perspectives and foster critical viewing by encouraging reflection and discussion.

R E F L E C T I O N S

Reflections adds new voices and historical perspectives to discussions sparked by *An American Love Story*. The readings also explore some of the questions raised by the documentary.

9 Reading 2: **“Little Boxes”**

13 Reading 3: **“Mixed Blessings”**

17 Reading 4: **Separations**

21 Reading 5: **Race and Racism**

25 Reading 6: **Race and Marriage**

28 Reading 7: **“Parallel Realities”**

*An American Love Story* chronicles a year and a half in the life of an interracial family in Flushing, a section of Queens in New York City. The series features Bill Sims, a blues musician; Karen Wilson, a manager for a large corporation; and their daughters—Cicily, a senior in religious studies at Colgate University, and Chaney, a seventh grader. The ordinary and extraordinary moments in their lives can spark important conversations about race, membership, and identity.

In reflecting on what we know about one another across racial lines, journalist Clarence Page writes that he and his white friends grew up in “parallel realities, not unlike the parallel universes” of science fiction. “Even as the evil walls of legal segregation were tumbling down, thanks to the hard-fought struggles of the civil rights movement, it occurred to me that my reality might never be quite the same as that experienced by my white friends. Separated by thick walls of prejudice, we would view each other through windows of stained-glass perceptions, colored by our personal experiences.”

How do we break through the “thick walls of prejudice” and see the world from someone else’s point of view? Page believes that the process begins with conversation. “True integration, unlike assimilation, is a two-way street. It involves *cultural sharing*, a genuine respect and interest in difference, not cultural submergence by one party to please another.” Such conversations can be hard. “Behind our questions of race lurk larger questions of identity, our sense of who we are, where we belong, and where we are going. Our sense of place and peoplehood within groups is a perpetual challenge in some lives, particularly lives in America, a land where identity bubbles quite often out of nothing more than a weird alchemy of history and choice.” Page observes, “In race talk, as in sex talk, candor often is corrupted by our own defensive need to protect our racial egos and insecurities.”

Perhaps that is why a Facing History and Ourselves student recently insisted, “It’s important for adults to have these conversations with kids—I know it’s uncomfortable, but I’ve never heard a kid say a conversation about race was boring.” These conversations are also essential to democracy. They are the work of every citizen, because democracy is not a product but a process. It is a process that can only be carried out in what Judge Learned Hand once called “the spirit of liberty.” He defined it as the spirit “which is not too sure it is right,” the spirit “which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women,” and “weighs their interests alongside one’s own without bias.”

Margot Stern Strom  
Executive Director, Facing History and Ourselves

## ***An American Love Story***

This study guide is designed to help educators use *An American Love Story* to deepen and expand discussions of race, family, membership, and identity in college and high school history, sociology, psychology, and literature classes. Some teachers will wish to show the entire series over a period of weeks, allowing time for discussion after each showing. Most will focus on a few episodes. This study guide supports both approaches.

The guide contains seven readings, each followed by “Connections”—a series of questions and activities that focus discussion, prompt a writing project, or inspire research. The first reading introduces the series and is designed for use immediately before and just after seeing an episode of *An American Love Story*. The readings that follow add new voices and historical perspectives to discussions sparked by the documentary. These readings may also be used to widen perspectives and enhance an understanding of a single episode or a combination of episodes. The activities also encourage students to consider how their own experiences affect their responses to the documentary.

### OVERVIEW of the Series

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A brief summary of each episode in *An American Love Story* follows. Those that have been starred (\*) are likely to be of interest to high school students and can be used to explore such concepts as family, race, racism, stereotypes, membership, and identity or prompt discussion of these and related ideas.

- \*EPISODE 1: ***“Welcome to America”*** The episode introduces the Wilson-Sims family—Bill Sims, Karen Wilson, and their daughters Cicily and Chaney. A wedding anniversary prompts Bill and Karen to reflect on the years that have passed since they met and what those years have meant to their family. The episode includes a family trip to Colgate University to bring Cicily home for the summer at the end of her junior year.
- \*EPISODE 2: ***“A Piece of the Puzzle is Missing”*** Much of the episode focuses on questions of identity, as Cicily prepares for a semester in Nigeria. Her parents express their fears and hopes for the trip. The episode also includes Bill’s trip to Columbus, Ohio, for a concert.
- \*EPISODE 3: ***“I’ve Fallen and I Can’t Get Up”*** On a school-sponsored trip to Nigeria, Cicily experiences independence and her first romance. She also finds herself in the midst of tensions between not only the black and white American students but also the African American students and Nigerians. Cicily begins to confront the labels other people attach to her identity.

- EPISODE 4:** *“It’s Another Year and I Ain’t Gone”* Cicily returns home and tries to tell her parents about the racial tensions that divided her group in Nigeria. As the family prepares to celebrate Christmas, Bill’s parents arrive. Cicily is hospitalized with malaria. She is released in time to celebrate New Year’s Eve with family and friends.
- EPISODE 5:** *“Chaney and the Boy”* Chaney begins to assert her independence. She and her mother argue over whether Chaney is old enough to date. The two finally agree that her boyfriend Daniel can come to the house.
- \*EPISODE 6:** *“You and Me Against the World”* Cicily and Karen reflect on race and identity, as they discuss how people react to them in public. Cicily explains why the transition to Colgate was so difficult for her as a biracial woman. Cicily’s friends at her predominately white sorority discuss how she is seen at school. Karen confronts the past by visiting her mother in Florida.
- EPISODE 7:** *“True Love”* Karen learns that she needs an operation. After her surgery, the family travels to Colgate for Cicily’s graduation.
- \*EPISODE 8:** *“Marion Truth”* In this episode, which raises questions about race, identity, and history, Bill travels to Marion, Ohio, where he has two children from an earlier relationship. Tina and Alton lived with their mother but saw Bill regularly. Now Alton is in trouble with the law and Bill has come to offer help and support. Bill and his father also reflect on what life was like for African Americans in Marion when Bill was coming of age.
- EPISODE 9:** *“It’s My Job”* After graduating from Colgate, Cicily struggles to find a job and an apartment of her own. The entire family travels to Ohio for Tina’s wedding. Bill decides to stop drinking as he prepares to celebrate another birthday.
- \*EPISODE 10:** *“We Were Never Ozzie and Harriet”* At Karen’s 25th high school reunion, friends and relatives reflect on the way they and others responded to her relationship with Bill in the 1970s and the hardships the couple endured during those years.

## ADDITIONAL Resources

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For a fuller treatment of ideas and concepts related to identity, membership and race, see Chapters 1 and 2 of the *Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book: Holocaust and Human Behavior*. More information about race and racism can also be found in *Confronting the American Eugenics Movement*. Both are available from the Facing History Resource Center.

Also available from the Resource Center are a variety of videos that can be used to extend and enrich this study guide. Possibilities include:

***Black Is... Black Ain't*** (California Newsreel, 87 min.) A documentary about African American identity.

***Color Adjustment*** (California Newsreel, 87 min.) A study of prejudice and stereotyping on prime-time TV. Part 1 focuses on programs that aired between 1948 and 1968 and Part 2 on those that aired between 1968 and 1991.

***Ethnic Notions*** (California Newsreel, 56 min.) A documentary that traces the evolution of racism by examining cartoons, feature films, popular songs, and other aspects of popular culture.

***Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years*** (PBS Video, 54 min. per segment) A comprehensive history of the American civil rights movement that contains rare historical footage as well as present-day interviews. Segments may be used to provide historical context.

***Family Name*** (Opelika Films, 89 min.) A documentary that traces filmmaker Macky Alston's efforts to uncover the history that unites three present-day families that share his last name—two are black and one is white.

The following books can be used to explore specific topics and/or concepts highlighted in this guide:

Chideya, Farai. *The Color of Our Future*. William Morrow & Co., 1999.

Funderburg, Lisa. *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity*. Morrow, 1994.

Gillespie, Peggy. *Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families*. Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1997

Haizlip, Shirlee Taylor. *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White*. Simon & Schuster, 1994.

Nash, Gary. *Forbidden Love: The Secret History of Mixed-Race America*. Henry Holt, 1999.

O'Hearn, Claudine Chiawei, editor. *Half and Half*, Pantheon Books, 1998.

Page, Clarence. *Showing My Color*. Harper Collins, 1996.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Basic Books, 1997.

READING 1

## *An American Love Story*

In the documentary you are about to view, filmmaker Jennifer Fox follows the everyday experiences of an interracial family—Bill Sims, Karen Wilson, and their daughters, Cicily and Chaney. They are not actors. They are real people shown in real situations. Fox hopes that audiences will “like these people enough to go on a journey with them and take a look at their own lives. They are going to see race with a capital letter, but they’re also going to see individuals with big differences figure out a way to live together. That’s a big lesson, too.”



In reflecting on the filmmaker’s expectations, *New York Times* reporter William Grimes observes, “A documentary that chronicles people’s lives really ends up being three works: the one the filmmaker thinks he is making, the one the subject thinks is being made and the one that the audience members see and filter through their own prejudices.”

When Grimes asked Bill Sims why he and his family participated in the documentary, Sims replied, “From the beginning, I wanted to take away some of the mystery surrounding interracial relationships. I wanted the film to show that we’re doing the same things as everyone else, raising our kids, paying bills, trying to make Christmas nice.”

To capture those ordinary moments, Fox and co-producer Jennifer Fleming shot over a thousand hours of film showing the family as it really was and events as they really happened. Later that footage was cut and arranged to tell a story.

The technique Fox used is often called *cinéma vérité*. It describes a film that captures real people in real situations. In shooting *cinéma vérité*, the filmmaker usually stands apart from the subject or the event being recorded. In creating *An American Love Story*, Fox took a different stance. “I don’t believe in fly-on-the-wall filmmaking,” she says, referring to the *cinéma vérité* procedure of having subjects “ignore” the camera, while the filmmaker remains detached from both the subject and event. “Filmmaking is a totally subjective experience,” she argues. “So let’s acknowledge it and by doing that equalize the equation. It’s not about what I can get from the subject but how we can work together to reach the deepest truth, whether it’s about race or about parenting.” Therefore, she combined *cinéma vérité* footage with thoughtful interviews with the family, relatives, and friends. Through that process, she and the family forged “a living and creative partnership” that Fox believes “allowed us to create a much truer portrait of who they are, how they feel, and how they live.”

## C O N N E C T I O N S

William Grimes writes that documentaries like *An American Love Story* end up being three works—"the one the filmmaker thinks he is making, the one the subject thinks is being made and the one that the audience members see and filter through their own prejudices." What is the documentary the filmmaker thinks she is making? What is the film the subjects think is being made?



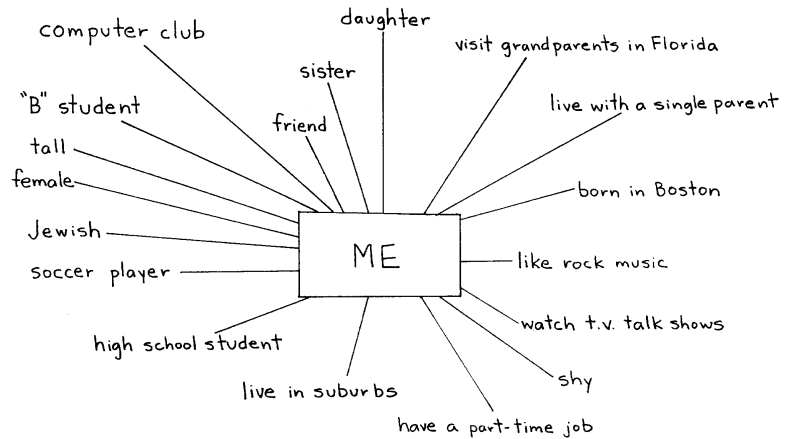
Before describing what you saw, think about who you are and what you brought to the film. What experiences have shaped your view of the world? One way to answer such questions is by creating an identity chart. The diagram on this page is an example of such a chart. It contains the words or phrases people attach to themselves as well as the ones that society gives them. Begin with the words or phrases that you use to describe yourself. Then add the labels others might attach to you.



Write a paragraph describing the episode(s) you saw. Compare and contrast your paragraph with those of your classmates. What do your responses have in common? What differences seem most striking? Use your identity charts to help you account for differences.



Construct identity charts for Bill, Karen, Cicily, and Chaney like the one you made for yourself. Add to them as you watch additional episodes. After you have completed their charts, study them to determine what they have in common. Use your answers to



create an identity chart for the Wilson-Sims family. Make a similar chart for your own family. What does your family have in common with the Wilson-Sims family? With other families in your class?

Bill Sims says he hopes that *An American Love Story* will "take away some of the mystery surrounding interracial relationships." What is the "mystery"? What are some of the ways the filmmaker tries to remove the mystery? Tries to help you see the family not only through her eyes but also those of family members? What other experiences have helped you or others see the world from someone else's perspective or understand someone else's point of view? What experiences have had the opposite effect?

Interview friends and adults about experiences that have helped them view the world from another point of view? How important is the media—film, TV, books, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet—to expanding our view of the world?



**What is the relationship between what is shot by a filmmaker and what an audience sees on a movie screen or TV set?**

Jennifer Fox views filmmaking as “a totally subjective experience.” Write a working definition of the word *subjective*. A working definition is one that grows and changes as you encounter new information and develop new insights. One way to begin is by listing examples of *subjectivity* and then determining what those examples have in common. What is the relationship between subjectivity and reality? Between subjectivity and objectivity? Is one necessarily truer than the other?



Pioneers in documentary filmmaking have often used their work to make powerful statements about issues or ideas that they consider important. To what extent is Jennifer Fox a part of that tradition? On what ideas or issues does she focus her documentary? What is her point of view on these issues?



In reflecting on the technological advances in the 1950s and 1960s that allowed filmmakers to “capture on film people as they were and events as they happened,” director Barry Hampe observes:

With these developments, filmmakers could—and did—record events as they happened. And because they filmed real people (not actors) doing real things in a real situation, it was almost inevitable that they began to think of nonfiction filmmaking as documenting reality. Because the footage was *real*, it seemed to be the best evidence of its own truth. Cinema became *vérité*, the camera couldn't lie, and an entire generation of filmmakers went about trying to fit reality into a little box. It seemed so easy. It wasn't.<sup>1</sup>

Why isn't it easy to fit reality into a little box? What is the relationship between what is shot by a filmmaker and what an audience sees on a movie screen or TV set?



If you could interview the filmmaker, what would you ask her? What would you ask the family in general or Bill, Karen, Cicily, or Chaney in particular? What would you like to tell the filmmaker or the family about your own experiences or those of someone you know or have read about?

<sup>1</sup> From *Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos* by Barry Hampe. Henry Holt and Co., 1997, 23.

## READING 2

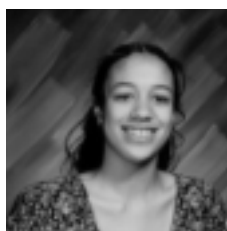
## "Little Boxes"



Cicily Wilson

Throughout *An American Love Story*, Cicily Wilson struggles with issues of identity. She sees herself as a unique individual but finds that other people want to reduce her to a category, to a label. In Episode 1, she tells her parents, "The color of my skin is like a card. Like a deck of cards. People are like, 'I know what your cards look like... You are black and that's it.' They've got my number. But I'm like, 'No I've got some kings, I've got some queens, I've got some jacks. I've got some aces. I've got a flush.' They don't know."

Anthony Wright has also grappled with labels. He writes of that struggle:



Chaney Sims

Little Boxes. "How would you describe yourself? (please check one)" Some aren't as cordial. "Ethnic Group": These little boxes and circles bring up an issue that threatens my identity. Who am I? Unlike many others, I cannot answer that question easily when it comes to ethnicity. My mother is Hispanic (for those who consider South America as Hispanic) with an Asian father and my father is white with English and Irish roots. What does that make me? My identity already gets lost when my mother becomes a "Latino" instead of an "Ecuadorean." The cultures of Puerto Rico and Argentina are distinct, even though they are both "Hispanic." The same applies to White, Asian, Native American or Black, all vague terms trying to classify cultures that have sometimes greater disparities inside the classification than with other cultures. Yet I can't even be classified by these excessively broad terms.

My classification problem doesn't stop with my ethnicity. My father is a blue-collar worker, yet the technical work he does is much more than manual labor. My family, through our sweat, brains, and savings, have managed to live comfortably. We no longer can really be classified as poor or lower class, but we really aren't middle class. Also, in my childhood my parents became disillusioned with the Catholic religion and stopped going to church. They gave me the option of going or not, but I was lazy and opted to stay in bed late Sunday mornings. Right now I don't even know if I am agnostic, atheist, or something else, like transcendentalist. I just don't fit into categories nicely.

My biggest conflict of identity comes from another source: education. In the seventh grade, I was placed in a prep school from P.S. 61. The only similarity between the two institutions is that they are both in the Bronx, yet one is a block away from Charlotte Street, a nationally known symbol of urban decay, while the other is in

one of the wealthiest sections of New York City. Prep for Prep, a program for disadvantaged students that starts in the fifth grade, worked with me for fourteen months, bringing me up to the private-school level academically and preparing me socially, but still, the transition was rough. Even in my senior year, I felt like I really did not fit in with the prep school culture. Yet I am totally separated from my neighborhood. My home happens to be situated there, and I might go to the corner bodega for milk and bananas, or walk to the subway station, but that is the extent of my contact with my neighborhood. I regret this, but when more than half the teenagers are high-school dropouts, and drugs are becoming a major industry there, there is no place for me. Prep for Prep was where I would “hang out” if not at my high school, and it took the place of my neighborhood and has been a valuable cushion. At high school, I was separate from the mainstream majority, but still an inextricable part of it, so I worked there and put my effort into making it a better place.

For a while, I desperately wanted to fit into a category in order to be accepted. Everywhere I went I felt out of place. When I go into the neighborhood restaurant to ask for *arroz y pollo*, my awkward Spanish and gringo accent makes the lady at the counter go in the back for someone who knows English, even though I think I know enough Spanish to survive a conversation. When I was little and had short straight black hair, I appeared to be one of the few Asians in my school and was tagged with the stereotype. I went to Ecuador to visit relatives and they could not agree about whether I was Latino or gringo. When the little boxes appeared on the Achievements, I marked Hispanic even though I had doubts on the subject. At first sight, I can pass as white, and my last name will assure that I will not be persecuted as someone who is dark and has “Rodriguez” as his last name. I chose Hispanic because I most identified with it, because of my Puerto Rican neighborhood that I grew up in, and my mother, who has a big influence on me. However, many people would not consider me a Latino. And by putting just “Hispanic,” “White,” or “Asian,” I felt as if I was neglecting a very essential side of me and lying in the process. I now put “Other” in those little boxes, and when possible indicate exactly what I am.

I realize now that the problem is not with me but with the identification system. The words *Black*, *White*, *Hispanic*, *Asian*, and *Native American*, describe more than one would expect. They describe genealogy, appearance, and culture, all very distinct things, which most people associate as one; but there exists many exceptions, like the person who grows up in the Black inner city and adopts that culture, but is white by birth; or the Puerto Rican immigrant with blue eyes and blond hair. Religion can also

obscure definitions, as is the case in Israel recently with the label “Jewish,” which can be a race, culture or religion, and the definition of being Jewish by birth. The classifications especially get confused when appearance affects the culture, as with non-White cultures due to discrimination. Defining what is “culture;” and the specifics also confuses the issue. For example, it can be argued that almost every American, regardless of race (genealogy), is at least to some degree [a part] of the White culture, the “norm” in this country. With more culturally and racially mixed people like myself entering society, these classifications have to be addressed and defined.

My mixture helps me look to issues and ideas from more than one viewpoint, and I like that. Racial, economic, social and religious topics can be looked upon with a special type of objectivity that I feel is unique. I am not objective. I am subjective with more than one bias, so I can see both sides of an argument between a black militant and a white conservative, a tenant and a landlord or a Protestant and a Catholic. I will usually side with the underdog, but it is necessary to understand opposing viewpoints in order to take a position. This diversity of self that I have, I enjoy, despite the confusion caused by a society so complex that sweeping generalizations are made. I cannot and don't deserve to be generalized or classified, just like anybody else. My background and position have affected me, but I dislike trying to be treated from that information. I am Anthony E. Wright, and the rest of the information about me should come from what I write, what I say and how I act. Nothing else.<sup>1</sup>

**When does a special designation become a box that limits a person?**

## C O N N E C T I O N S

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Construct an identity chart for Anthony Wright. How does it help explain why he calls his essay “Little Boxes”? Why does he find it so difficult to classify himself? When does a special designation become a box that limits a person?



ing? Do you or people you know face similar dilemmas? If so, how do you or they resolve those dilemmas? Does the reverse of Wright's dilemma ever cause a problem? That is, do people ever feel hurt because their membership in a group is not acknowledged?



What is Wright's dilemma? How is it similar to Cicily's? What differences seem most striking?

Psychologist Deborah Tannen writes, “We all know we are unique individuals, but we tend to see others as representative of groups. It’s a natural tendency, since we must see the world in patterns in order to make sense of it; we wouldn’t be able to deal with the daily onslaught of people and objects if we couldn’t predict a lot about them and feel that we know who and what they are. But this natural and useful ability to see patterns of similarity has unfortunate consequences. It is offensive to reduce an individual to a category, and it is also misleading.” Give examples of the ways that generalizing can be useful. Give examples of its “unfortunate consequences.” How does Wright’s essay support Tannen’s observations? How do Cicily’s experiences support those observations?



A Facing History and Ourselves student who dislikes being labeled or categorized was surprised to discover that her classmates had similar feelings. She writes:

I had always known that I didn’t fit into boxes and labels neatly, but it was not until all of us in class looked carefully at our identities that I realized that there were times when we all couldn’t fit into a box: racially, economically, religiously, or politically. That day we put away facades, superficial stereotypes, and imposed labels and came to the under-

standing that we are all crossbreeds in some way.... Once we were able to understand our own identities, we were better able to understand those of others.

How are her comments similar to Cicily’s response to people who tell her that “I know what your cards look like... You are black and that’s it”? How do the student’s comments explain why Wright concludes that “I cannot and don’t deserve to be generalized or classified, just like anybody else”? Do you agree?



Every ten years, the United States government conducts a census—or count of the people of the United States. One of the ways the nation categorizes its residents is by “race.” In response to criticisms like Anthony Wright’s, the government announced that on the 2000 census individuals may check more than one “racial” box. To what extent does the ruling address Wright’s concerns? Cicily’s concerns? What are the implications of the decision for other individuals? Groups? The nation as a whole?

<sup>1</sup> “Little Boxes” by Anthony Wright in *Points of View*, Amherst College, 1990.

## “Mixed Blessings”

In Episode 3, Cicily Wilson travels to Nigeria with a group of black and white students from Colgate. There her classmates demand that she choose one part of her identity over another. When she refuses, she finds herself increasingly isolated. At the same time, she and the other students are surprised to discover that the Nigerians they encounter on the trip seem to favor the white students over their African American counterparts. Ifemola J. Nwokoye understands the pain and the confusion of both experiences. Her mother is a white American and her father Nigerian. She writes:



*Cicily Wilson with a Nigerian friend.*

“Mixed blessings.” That’s what my mom always used to say to try and reinforce the idea that my sisters and I were “special individuals.” She wanted us to feel we had the best of two worlds as the products of an interracial marriage. She made it clear that we were neither victims of our heritage nor destined to live a life of anguish and confusion in a society that is so quick to judge. Rather, we should take pride in both our American and Nigerian heritages and celebrate our distinctive background. It seemed too simple a solution for such a complicated situation, yet I longed to believe her.

All humans are confronted with an identity crisis. Biracial children, too, must go through it, and for them it is a greater challenge because it’s doubly hard. In our society, being both black and white is a difficult thing to deal with; you learn from the beginning that you are supposed to be a member of some specific group and so will never be accepted for who you really are. You are born into a complex world that aims to simplify things by making divisions between races. In America, people are often unwilling to accept the idea of a biracial person. In our everyday lives we are constantly confronted with situations in which we must define who we are. We check the boxes marked “*white*,” “*black*,” on our college forms, but there is no space marked “*multiracial*” yet. There is no place for me.

It is also twice as hard coming from two very distinct cultures—Nigerian and American. In each society I am treated in extremely different ways; yet, in both, I am identified by color. In America, I’m seen as black. I remember the time a schoolmate asked a friend of mine why she was sharing her snack with a black girl. I recall the icy stares of the ladies behind the perfume and make-up counters of every department store, their plastic smiles melting to frowns as they watched my every move. Most vividly, however, I remember how my math teacher would repeatedly confuse me with the only other black girl in the class, even until the end of the year—his belief apparently being that all black people look alike. Through all my experiences

living in this culture, it has been a struggle to maintain my self worth.

Ironically, in Nigeria the situation is absolutely reversed. Because I am so much lighter than most people there, I am given a higher status and considered a model for others. I am treated with the utmost respect and admiration because in their eyes, I resemble a white person. What does remain consistent in both cultures is that I am not considered a biracial person; I'm still being labeled as one or the other.

I lived in Nigeria for the first seven years of my life and have visited on and off since my parents' divorce. As a child in Nigeria, I wasn't fully aware of people's perceptions of me, but I had a sense that I was somehow "better" than most of the children I knew, and that I had something special that they lacked. I remember being the teacher's favorite; the other students would get beaten, while I never experienced a lash of my teacher's cane. And I recall sitting in the front seat of my dad's car during a traffic jam. The little hands and noses of the village children would press hard against the window of the car, as if to penetrate the barrier of glass to steal a precious part of me. The society conditioned me to view myself as superior.

Drawing on my experience in America and in Nigeria, I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that there is no place in either of my cultures where I can be accepted for who I am. I think of the irony in both experiences, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

I know that I must ignore the limitations and labels society places on me, and instead, realize that I am an individual with unique insight, able to encompass the best of both worlds. I refuse to see my biracial identity as confining, and I am determined not be defeated by other people's narrow vision. Increasingly I am able to get strength from my inner voice and accept my own perspective on who I am. I now take pride in my two cultures. I can hear my mother's soft voice, uttering those painfully simple words, letting me know that I am fortunate to have these "*mixed blessings*." And, finally, I know she is right.<sup>1</sup>

## C O N N E C T I O N S

In a book that explores the relationship between family and identity, Elizabeth Stone writes:

We are shaped by our families' notions of our identities which exist as an idea beyond the reach of measurement. The image they mirror back to us exists earlier and more substantially than we

ourselves do. And among the primary vehicles families use to mirror us to ourselves are the family stories we hear about ourselves. These stories... are a record of our family's fantasies, often unconscious about who they hope we are or fear we are."<sup>2</sup>

What parts of our identity are within "the reach of measurement"? What parts exist beyond its reach? How do our families shape those parts of our identity? What stories do Bill Sims and Karen Wilson tell about their children? What do those stories reveal about their hopes for their daughters? Their fears for them? How have those hopes and fears shaped each daughter's identity? How are those hopes and fears similar to the ones Ifemoa Nwokoye's mother has for her? How are they like the ones your family has for you?



How does society shape the parts of our identity that exist "beyond the reach of measurement"? To what extent does your answer explain why Ifemoa Nwokoye believes that the identity crisis everyone faces is "doubly hard" for biracial children? Who else in American society may confront similar challenges in forging an identity? For example, how are the challenges young immigrants face similar to those of biracial children? What differences seem most striking?



Suppose Ifemoa Nwokoye had met with Cicily and her classmates before their trip to Nigeria. What advice might she have offered them? Suppose you had met with them. What advice might you have offered?

What experiences would you have shared? What effect might such conversations have had on the racial tensions that marred the trip? How hard are conversations about race? A Facing History student recently observed, "It's important for adults to have these conversations with kids—I know it's uncomfortable, but I've never heard a kid say a conversation about race was boring." Why are those conversations often uncomfortable? Why are they rarely boring?



The word *irony* describes a contrast between what is stated and what is meant or between what is expected to happen and what actually takes place. There are various forms of irony.

- Irony of situation—an event that directly contradicts one's expectations. To what extent is the way Ifemoa Nwokoye is treated in Nigeria an example of irony of situation? To what extent is the way she is treated in the United States an example of irony of situation?
- Dramatic irony—a contradiction between one's thoughts and what one knows to be true. What is the contradiction that Ifeoma Nwokoye describes between her thoughts and feelings about herself and what society "knows" to be true?
- Verbal irony—a word or phrase that suggests the opposite of its usual meaning. To what extent is the title "mixed blessing" an example of verbal irony?

What are the ironies in Cicily's experiences at college? In her trip to Nigeria?



**How does society shape the parts of our identity that exist "beyond the reach of measurement"?**

Bill Sims and Karen Wilson respond differently to Cicily's trip to Nigeria. How do you account for those differences? What do those differences suggest about the ways our ethnic or racial heritage shapes our attitudes, interests, and even beliefs?



In Episode 2, Bill Sims tells filmmaker Jennifer Fox what Cicily's trip to Nigeria means to him. "I don't think it's possible for any non-black person to understand that 400 years ago, somebody brought somebody that's related to me, here by force. Four hundred years later, somebody related to me, from me, is going back by choice." The history of slavery in the United States shapes the way Sims and many other African Americans view Africa and its peoples. A very different history has shaped the attitudes and values of Africans in general and Nigerians in particular. Research Nigeria's history, particularly its history at the time much of Africa was divided into colonies. How may that history have influenced the way that Nigerians think about race? Their view of whites and blacks?



In 1971, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip and her family had an experience in the Virgin Islands similar to the one the African Americans from Colgate had in Nigeria. As in Nigeria, blacks are in the majority in the Islands. So when Haizlip's husband was offered a job

there, the couple was eager to relocate. As Haizlip recalls, "Our daughters were in the early years of their schooling, and we thought that an environment where the government, the schools, the newspaper and many businesses were black-owned and black-run would be the most self-affirming gift we could give them." To their surprise, "the open-armed acceptance" they expected did not come right away. She writes:

The Islanders regarded us as intrusive Continentals first and distant black cousins second. We quickly learned that because of their history and what they perceived as beneficent treatment by the Danes, European whites (especially Danes) were the favored visitors.

The notion of race was the direct opposite of that in the States. In the Islands, if you asked if someone was black or white, a native would answer according to skin color, not race. But if one had any white blood in his heritage, he could claim to be white. We learned to our dismay that even in the Islands white was the race of choice.<sup>3</sup>

How are Haizlip's experiences in the Virgin Islands similar to those of the Colgate students in Nigeria? What differences seem most striking? What do your answers suggest about the legacies of colonial rule? About the way a people's history shapes individual attitudes and beliefs?

<sup>1</sup> From *Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families*. Interviews by Peggy Gillespie. Copyright © 1997 by Peggy Gillespie. University of Massachusetts Press, 1998, 137-138.

<sup>2</sup> From *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins* by Elizabeth Stone. Time Books, 1988, 167.

<sup>3</sup> From *The Sweeter the Juice: A Family Memoir in Black and White* by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip. Simon & Schuster, 1994, 213-214, 215-216.

## Separations

College was not what Cicily Wilson hoped it would be. She recalls, “I hated Colgate. I hated being there. I hated the race relations, segregation.... The white students, the black students, they had the wrong idea about life.” Her father observes, “She had more difficulty with the black students than she did with the white students because of her racial make-up and the way she was brought up. Black kids tend to group together. She wasn’t brought up to be segregated.”

In *The Color of Our Future*, journalist Farai Chideya describes a conversation about that kind of segregation with five African American students in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a community where blacks make up about seven percent of the population.

The five range from Arema, a petite, high-voiced, fifteen-year-old sophomore, to Reginald (the only guy among them), an athletic college freshman. Most come from military families. Unlike their parents’ generation, they’re the beneficiaries of being able to live in racially integrated neighborhoods, something they acknowledge. Says Arema, “Our generation is different because we’ve been around white people and stuff and different cultures more. My dad, when he was in high school in Arkansas, his senior year, got bused to high school. There were little riots every time they played ‘Dixie’ at the school.” But these teens feel as if something’s missing—a connection to black culture on one side, and a true bond with white students on the other. Says Monica, a fourteen-year-old sophomore with dimples who sports a Mickey Mouse watch. “All blacks are spread out. That’s both good and bad.” “The good is, being isolated from the black community makes me independent,” Reginald picks up seamlessly. “It makes me strive. The bad is that you’re robbed of your culture.” When festivals like Juneteenth (which originated with the liberation of slaves in Texas) come around, kids in Colorado Springs choose to go someplace with a larger black community, like Denver’s Montbello neighborhood.

These kids are fluent in the ways of white culture and the nuances of living in a mostly white town. But they feel as if many people would like them to give up their sense of black culture—something that only makes them stick more closely with other blacks and Mexicans. They cite incidents ranging from blatant prejudice to more farcical misunderstandings as evidence of what they have to put up with. When fifteen-year-old Dara was in seventh grade, she punched a white boy out for repeatedly calling her a nigger at school. (She says the teacher did nothing.) Today, most of her close friends are black and one is Mexican. She also recounts a more

benign (though annoying) incident. “My sister had pineapple waves [a fragile, heavily gelled hairstyle] and she went to a job interview and all the white people were squishing them,” she says. “If you put grease in your hair, [whites are] like, what kind of grease, cooking grease? They don’t understand.” Natoshia, a seventeen-year-old who was actually born in Colorado Springs, says, “I don’t have to explain things about my hair, whatever, because I don’t interact with [whites] as much as I—I don’t want to say should—but as much as I do with my other black friends. I don’t think I’m missing anything. And I don’t think they’re missing anything either.”... These students are tired of being cultural ambassadors to white America.

This is the classic dilemma of what many... call black self-segregation, the idea that blacks are clumping together, rebuffing the best efforts of whites to get to know them. A report by a black think tank makes it clear the issue is far more complex. The Joint Center on Political and Economic Studies warned black college students against creating “self-segregating cocoons... [which enforce] feelings of paranoia.” But it also added: “It is disquieting to be taken into a college dining room and be shown row upon row of tables occupied solely by white students and one or two tables of black students, and then ask why blacks insist on segregating themselves.... The assumption [is] that black students should make concessions to the predominance of whites, and also represent their race.” In a majority-white environment, many black students feel like they have to stick together, either for camaraderie or to avoid harassment.

These students suspect that blacks are singled out for disciplinary action at local high schools, something borne out by statistics. Arema attends Air Academy High School. “The teachers are OK [but] the hall monitors follow you if you’re in too big a group.” And recently, a black student was expelled for fixing his eyeglasses with a pen knife—something forbidden by the school’s zero-tolerance law on weapons. “White people couldn’t really understand why we were getting offended [by the laws]. It doesn’t really affect them because they’re not being watched as closely as we are.... And we were talking about how if he was white, he would probably not be kicked out.”

All of these students are eager to talk about issues like zero tolerance and self-segregation. But they say they’ve only got each other to turn to: their teachers and principals aren’t helping them deal with these tough, controversial issues. In a vacuum of school leadership, these teens are left to make their own decisions about how to treat whites who don’t know much about black culture. I tell them that the idea that

blacks bear all the responsibility for segregating, and whites are simply befuddled bystanders is naïve. But I also push the black students to tell me one thing: if they don't teach white America about black life, who will? Arema replies that she does spend time with white students. "At lunch, there's a black lunch group and a white lunch group," and she switches between the two. But if they want to know about black history, Arema says they better go look in a book. "We learn about their history all the time," she says, musing that there ought to be more taught about non-whites in class. Once white students get the basics from a book, they can come to her, she says adding, "You don't have to be friends to ask a little question." "I'm not gonna be explaining to nobody, unless they ask and they truly want to know," chimes in Monica, who has a close white friend she met in junior high school. "When I had my braids, a boy said, 'Do you wash them?' He didn't want to know—he was just trying to be funny. I was kind of upset about that."

But the oldest and most mature of the students realizes that he's probably going to have to make some time to talk about black culture. Reginald goes to Drake University, which he calls similar to Colorado Springs in its racial mix and its attitudes. This year, he chaired the speakers and issues committee at his school and organized roundtables on race. During Black History Month, "a lot of white students, because we're the minority and stuff, are making such an uproar about our culture. They come in and they say they want to learn a lot more about it. And if they were willing to come in and not be sarcastic about it, or even if they were sarcastic but willing to sit down and listen ... we would have little conversations," he says. "And the more we would do it, the more we would see people open up and talk, and kind of erase a lot of the racial tension we had." <sup>1</sup>

## C O N N E C T I O N S

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In reflecting on her interviews with biracial Americans, Lisa Funderberg notes, "The vantage point many biracial people feel they have been born into—'always seeing two sides of the coin,' as one woman described it—has served, for some, to devalue the coin." What does she mean by that statement? To what extent do Cicily Wilson's experiences at Colgate support it? How important is it to fit in? How does it feel

when you don't fit in? How does it affect your self-esteem? When in a child's development is he or she most vulnerable to issues related to "in" and "out" group behavior? Are adolescents more vulnerable than young children? What is the relationship between "in" and "out" group behavior and the pressure to choose a "racial identity"?



Psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum writes:

As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the question of identity, asking “Who am I? Who can I be?” in ways they have not done before. For blacks asking “Who am I?” includes thinking about “Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be black?...”

Why do black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. Our self perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when young black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies.<sup>2</sup>

What answers does Tatum suggest in this passage to the question of “why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?”

What is “self-segregation”? Why is Cicily Wilson uncomfortable with it? Why does Farai Chideya call it “the classic dilemma”? Journalist Clarence Page points out that “black students sitting with one another is called ‘self-segregating’ or ‘balkanizing.’ White students sitting together is called ‘normal.’ If self-segregation is not a virtue, it also must be remembered that, alas, students of color didn’t invent it.”<sup>3</sup> How do Page’s remarks explain why the experts

Chideya quotes see the issue as “far more complex” than African Americans “clumping together, rebuffing the best efforts of whites to get to know them”? What role do they suggest white Americans play in “black self-segregation”?

Farai Chideya asks the black students she interviewed, “If you don’t teach white America about black life, who will?” How do they respond? How would you respond? What would you like to tell those students about your own experiences with self-segregation? What would you like to tell Cicily?

When Beverly Daniel Tatum stresses the importance of conversations about race, her students want to know, “How do I engage in meaningful dialogue about racial issues? How do I get past my fear? How do I get past my anger? Am I willing to take the risk of speaking up? Can I trust that there will be others to listen and support me? Will it make a difference anyway? Is it worth the effort?” How would you answer those questions? What do Reginald’s remarks suggest about the importance of interracial conversations? About the way we learn to walk in someone else’s shoes? What conversations have broadened your perspectives? Helped you to view the world from someone else’s point of view? What part do documentaries like *An American Love Story* play in encouraging dialogue? In expanding horizons?

<sup>1</sup> From “*The Color of Our Future*,” by Farai Chideya. William Morrow & Co., 1999. 145-148.

<sup>2</sup> From *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum. Basic Books, 1997, 53-54.

<sup>3</sup> From *Showing My Color* by Clarence Page. Harper Collins, 1996, 262-263.

## Race and Racism

In response to a question about the making of *An American Love Story*, Karen Wilson told a reporter, “A lot of times Jennifer [Fox] would ask race things, and it would take me aback. To me, it’s my family. I’d say many times: ‘I just don’t get it like that. Bill is Bill, I’m Karen, the girls are the girls, this is our life. There’s nothing more to it than that.’” Although Karen and Bill discuss Cicily’s struggles to be accepted as an individual, they do not talk much about race unless they are asked about it. Poet Lori Tsang’s family also rarely discusses race. She observes, “Probably, my parents didn’t talk much about race because they didn’t understand it. After all, who really does?... Like water, it takes on the shape of whatever contains it—whatever culture, social structure, political system. But like water, it slips through your fingers when you try to hold it.”<sup>1</sup>



*Karen Wilson and Cicily*

Race “slips through our fingers” because it is a social invention. “It is not biology that determines race. It is bureaucrats,” writes journalist Clarence Page. In nearly every census since 1790, the United States government has defined race differently. Definitions of race vary not only from time to time but also place to place. In the early 1900s, for example, over half of the states in the United States had anti-miscegenation laws banning marriages between individuals of different races as a way of protecting “the purity of the white race.” These laws raised the question, Who is “white”? In a legal brief filed in the 1960s by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (the NAACP), the organization commented on the various ways states answered that question:

In Arkansas, a Negro is defined as any person who has in his or her veins “any Negro blood whatever;” in Florida, one ceases to be a Negro when he has less than “one-eighth of African or Negro blood,” and in Oklahoma, anyone not of the “African descent” is miraculously transmuted into a member of the white race.

Government officials have had a hard time categorizing people by race, because there are more variations within a race than there are between races. In researching her family’s history in the 1990s, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip summarizes current thinking about race:

Dr. Luigi Cavalli-Sforza tells us in *The History and Geography of Human Genes*, the first genetic atlas of the world,... that modern Europeans... have long been a mixed population whose genetic ancestry is 65 percent Asian and 35 percent African. There never has been any such thing as a “Caucasoid” gene. Nor is there such a creature as a “pure” white or black American. During recent hearings of the Senate

Committee on Government Affairs on the Human Genome Diversity Project, Dr. Cavalli-Sforza and Dr. Mary-Claire King, a geneticist at the University of California at Berkeley, discussed the implications of their work. They called racism “an ancient scourge of humanity” and expressed the hope that further extensive study of world populations would help “undercut conventional notions of race and underscore the common bonds between all humans.”

Just from looking at archival records of my family, I know that every census has measured race differently. In different periods the same people in my family were listed as mulatto, black, or white. The designation could depend on the eye of the beholder or the neighborhood where they lived. In the meantime, their neighbors, their co-workers, and their communities at large saw them as either black or white, depending on who decided what.<sup>2</sup>

In 1998, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) issued a statement on race that says in part:

Physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social [meanings] that humans put on them. Today scholars in many fields argue that race as it is understood in the USA was a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples, and those peoples of Africa brought to provide slave labor.<sup>3</sup>

The report goes on to note that in the early 1800s slaveholders justified slavery by magnifying differences among Europeans, Africans, and American Indians and then insisting that those differences were “God-given.” A number of scientists incorporated these mistaken notions about human differences into their research. Eventually these myths about race spread to other areas of the world where they “became a strategy for dividing, ranking and controlling colonized people....” But racist thinking was not limited to the “colonial situation.” The report notes:

In the latter part of the 19th century, [race] was employed by Europeans to rank one another and to justify social, economic, and political inequalities among their peoples. During World War II, the Nazis under Adolf Hitler enjoined the expanded ideology of race and racial differences and took them to a logical end: the extermina-

tion of 11 million people of “inferior races” ... and other unspeakable brutalities of the Holocaust.

Race thus evolved as a world view, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior... Racial myths bear no relationship to the reality of human capabilities or behavior. Scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human difference in research has led to countless errors.

## C O N N E C T I O N S

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Lori Tsang writes of her parents’ silence about race, “Maybe it was this, the unspoken, which remained elusive yet suspended in the silences, that drew me closer to my African American friends—the experience of being different from the majority of white people, the experience of racial prejudice.” How do the things that remain unspoken in a family shape attitudes and values? Which is more powerful—the things that are openly discussed or those that are never or rarely talked about? What do Bill Sims and Karen Wilson tell their children about race? How do you think those messages have affected the way Cicily sees herself and the world around her? How have they affected Chaney?



Lori Tsang’s aunt and uncle took a trip across the United States in the 1950s. Aware of segregation laws in the South, they were careful to sit at the back of buses and in separate compartments on trains. In one Southern city, however, a white bus driver ordered them to move to the front of the bus to sit with whites. Tsang says of the incident:

Race is the myth upon which the reality of racism is predicated, the wild card the racist always keeps hidden up his sleeve. The racist has the power to determine whether the card will be a diamond or a spade, whether a Chinese is black or white.

How is she defining the word *race*? What is she suggesting about the meaning of the word *racism*? Write a working definition of the word *race*. Explain what the word means to you. Then add the meanings described in this reading. Next create a working definition of the word *racism*. Keep in mind that the ending *-ism* refers to a doctrine or principle. Can you be a racist if you do not believe in the concept of race?



During the years of apartheid in South Africa, hundreds of people officially changed their race each year by applying to a special government agency. In 1985, a government official reported:

702 Colored people turned white.

19 whites became Colored.

One Indian became white.

Three Chinese became white.

**Can you be  
a racist if you  
do not believe  
in the concept  
of race?**

50 Indians became Colored.  
 43 Coloreds became Indians.  
 21 Indians became Malay.  
 30 Malays went Indian.  
 249 blacks became Colored.  
 20 Coloreds became black.  
 Two blacks became "other Asians."  
 One black was classified Griqua.  
 11 Coloreds became Chinese.  
 Three Coloreds went Malay.  
 One Chinese became Colored.  
 Eight Malays became Colored.  
 Three blacks were classed as Malay.  
 No blacks became white and no whites became black.

Why would a government have a procedure for changing one's race? To what extent does the procedure support Lois Tsang's definition of race and racism? To what extent does it support yours?

Martha Minow, a professor of law, writes, "When we identify one thing as unlike the others, we are dividing the world; we use our language to exclude, to distinguish—to discriminate." How do her comments apply to popular ideas about race? To the use of racial categories in everyday life even

though experts tell us that race has no scientific meaning? How do those categories affect the way we see ourselves? The way others view us?



How does the statement by the AAA help explain variations in the way states defined black and white Americans? How does the statement help us understand why those laws remained on the books until 1967, the year the United States Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional? What kind of power do ideas—even mistaken ideas—have to shape the way we see ourselves and others?



In her novel, *Paradise*, Toni Morrison meditates on questions of race and gender, of "us" and "them." A number of readers have noticed that she never mentions the race of several women in the book. When asked why, Toni Morrison said she wanted "to have the reader believe—finally—after you know everything about these women, their interior lives, their past, their behavior—that the one piece of information you don't know, which is, the race, may not, in fact matter. And when you do know it, what do you know?" How would you answer her question?

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Half and Half*, edited by Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn. Pantheon Books, 1998, 209-210.

<sup>2</sup> From "Passing" by Shirlee Taylor Haizlip. *American Heritage*, February/March, 1995, 47. Reprinted by permission of American Heritage Magazine, a division of Forbes, Inc. © Forbes, Inc. 1995.

<sup>3</sup> From "The American Anthropological Association Preliminary Statement on Race," *Anthropology Newsletter*, April, 1997.

## Race and Marriage

Bill Sims and Karen Wilson met in the summer of 1967. It was not an easy time for a time for a black man and a white woman to date, let alone to marry. In reflecting on their relationship, Bill says, “You grow up in America and white people married white people and black people married black people. That’s the way it was.” He describes the summer of 1967 as “our beginning of the revolution.” Karen recalls it as a time when “children started questioning their parents’ opinions and values and everything else.”



The 1960s were years of change almost everywhere in the United States. One of the most important changes affected interracial marriages. In 1967, a court case challenged the constitutionality of anti-miscegenation laws. At the time, seventeen states had laws banning interracial marriages—including such northern states as Indiana, Oregon, and Montana.

The case centered on whether the marriage of a white man and a black woman was legal in the state of Virginia. Knowing that interracial marriages were against the law in their home state, Richard and Mildred Jeter Loving got married in 1958 in Washington D.C. Not long after they returned to Virginia, they were charged with a felony punishable “by confinement in the penitentiary for not less than one nor more than five years.” In 1959, a trial judge found the couple guilty. In his decision, he stated:



Almighty God created the races, white, black, yellow, Malay, and red, and He placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with His arrangement, there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that He separated the races shows that He did not intend for the races to mix.

*Bill Sims and Karen Wilson in the 1960s.*

The Lovings appealed that decision all the way to the United States Supreme Court. They argued that Virginia’s anti-miscegenation law violated their rights under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The Fourteenth Amendment, passed in 1866 and ratified in 1868, defines a United States citizen as a person “born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof.” It declares that no state may pass laws that “abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States,” deprive “any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law,” or deny “to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

After hearing both sides, the justices ruled unanimously in the Lovings' favor.

They stated:

The freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. Marriage is one of the basic "civil rights of man," fundamental to our very existence and survival .... To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as racial classification so directly subversive to the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment is surely to deprive all the state's citizens of liberty without due process of law. The Fourteenth Amendment requires that the freedom of choice to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the state.

The ruling made interracial marriages legal everywhere in the United States. Most states immediately repealed their anti-miscegenation laws, although Alabama kept its law on the books until 1999 even though it could not be enforced. Journalist Farai Chideya summarized current attitudes toward interracial marriages.

The taboo against black-white sex, marriage, and childbearing is an integral part of race in America. Though times have certainly changed, our biases about miscegenation haven't disappeared yet. More and more young Americans will have to confront America's prejudice about race mixing: the number of multi-racial children quadrupled between 1970 and 1990.

Make no mistake: race mixing is nothing new. By some estimates, 80 percent of African Americans have at least some white blood, and a quarter have some Native American blood. Nothing demonstrates this fact more clearly than a story that made front-page headlines in November 1998: evidence that Thomas Jefferson had fathered at least one black child....

What happened in the Jefferson family is just a high-profile example of the way most black Americans became mixed with white blood through sexual unions—sometimes consensual, often forced—between white male slave-owners and black female slaves....

What is new in America's racial classifications is the trend toward identifying as multi-racial. In the past, American defined anyone with "one drop" of black blood as black. And it became a point of pride in the black community for even those who could "pass" for white to proudly proclaim their black identity. It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that most young mixed-race blacks still identify as black. But more and more are identifying as multi-racial, and a few (depending on skin color as well as upbringing) as white. The issue is far broader than just a black and white one. Today's young adults include black-Asian individuals like [Tiger] Woods, Asian Hispanics, white Native Americans, and every other possible combination.<sup>1</sup>

## C O N N E C T I O N S

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In reflecting on his relationship with Karen Wilson, Bill Sims says, "You grow up in America and white people married white people and black people married black people. That's the way it was." What prompted the couple to challenge that tradition? What were the immediate consequences of their decision? The long-term consequences?



What obstacles did society place on Bill and Karen in their efforts to build a strong marriage? What obstacles did they face as a result of their own prejudices and misconceptions? How have they tried to overcome both sets of obstacles? How successful have they been?



Why do you think the Supreme Court regards marriage as "one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of

happiness by free men"? What other rights are also "essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness"?



What kind of power do ideas about race and "race mixing" have to shape the way we see ourselves and others? How have those ideas affected the marriage of Karen Wilson and Bill Sims? The lives of their children?

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Color of Our Future*, by Farai Chideya. William Morrow & Co., 1999, 38-39

## “Parallel Realities”

Bill Sims and Karen Wilson grew up in the 1950s. So did journalist Clarence Page. He recalls that during those years he and his white friends lived in “parallel realities, not unlike the parallel universes” of science fiction. Yet both he and they saw the same movies, rooted for the same teams, danced to the same music, and of course, watched the same TV shows. Indeed, they were the first generation of Americans whose attitudes and values were shaped at least in part by TV.

According to family historian Stephanie Coontz, people in the 1950s did not watch shows like “Leave to Beaver,” “Father Knows Best,” and “Ozzie and Harriet” to see their own lives reflected back at them. “They watched them to see how families were *supposed* to live—and also to get a little reassurance that they were headed in the right direction.”

Karen Wilson recalls her family as close to the ideal. She describes her childhood as idyllic, as “something out of ‘Leave It to Beaver.’” In a history of television, Gerard Jones explains why she and many other white Americans are nostalgic about the 1950s.

When the pop culture eye turns toward the mid-1950s, it almost invariably sees a time of changelessness, an eerily homogeneous landscape of spacious houses and smiling, self-satisfied WASP families.... Yet this willfully quiet veneer was hiding—and facilitating—the biggest shift in the American way of life since the spread of industry and the great immigrations in the last century. The sitcoms of those years, which have done so much to shape our view of the era, were conceived to explain and exploit and take some of the fear from that shift. In the process they came to crystallize some of the great American self-delusions of the 1950s.

...In 1929, on the eve of the depression, five and a half million American families, about eighth of the national total, were classified as having “middle class” incomes; by 1953, their number had soared almost to eighteen million, over a third of the total....

By 1953, one out of five Americans lived in the suburbs, and the number kept growing. The burbs were growing at fifteen times the rate of the rest of the country. *Fortune* calculated that the annual number of new arrivals exceeded the number of immigrants Ellis Island had ever seen during a single year....

The suburbs were the cradle of a new secular religion, a faith in Goods.... One ad exhorted consumers: “Live your dreams and meet your budget.” *House Beautiful* told its readers, “You will have a greater chance to be yourself than any people in the history of civilization.”... Paradise had become a commodity, and an affordable one at that.

...The nuclear family took on a special significance in this new context. Suburbia separated people from their neighbors, sealing them in the comfort of their dens and family rooms. It pulled people from familiar neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves. Along with fertility and prosperity, the new life brought unprecedented mobility. Corporate positions could mean frequent transfers. For those who were simply seeking a new promised land the abundance of jobs made it easy to pull up stakes. Extended families were left behind in the cities or rural areas, often a continent away. Spouse and children were often the suburbanite’s only close, long-term social group....<sup>1</sup>

Like most African Americans, Bill Sims and his family were outside “the consensus” Jones describes. Stephanie Coontz explains:

At the end of the 1950s, despite ten years of economic growth, 27.3 percent of the nation’s children were poor, including those in white “underclass” communities such as Appalachia. Almost 50 percent of married-couple African-American families were impoverished—a figure far higher than today. It’s no wonder African Americans are not likely to pick the 1950s as a golden age, even in comparison with the setbacks they experienced in the 1980s. When blacks moved north to find jobs in the postwar urban manufacturing boom they met vicious harassment and violence, first to prevent them from moving out of the central cities, then to exclude them from public space such as parks or beaches.<sup>2</sup>



*The Sims family  
in the 1960s.*

Bill’s parents were among the thousands of African Americans who left the South after World War II. They moved to Marion, Ohio, in 1946. His father says that he came to “raise my family, for a better living, for more money.” He, his wife, and children quickly learned that racism was not limited to the South. Marion, like most cities and towns in the North, was divided along racial lines in the 1940s and 1950s.

Julius Lester, a noted author and college professor who lived in both the North and South during those years, writes:

I have no nostalgia for segregation, for the “No Colored Allowed” signs covering the landscape like litter on the smooth, green grass of a park, I have no nostalgia for a time when I endangered my life if, while downtown shopping with my parents, I raised my eyes and accidentally met the eyes of a white woman. Black men and boys were lynched for this during my childhood and adolescence....

I grew up in a violent world. Segregation was a deathly spiritual violence, not only in its many restrictions on where we could live, eat, go to school, and go after dark. There was also the constant threat of physical death if you looked at a white man in what he considered the wrong way or if he didn't like your attitude.<sup>3</sup>



*Karen Wilson at her high school prom in the 1960s.*

At their high school reunion, one of Karen's friends recalls, “We were all blonde. We all used the same color. It was the thing to do then. That and the frosted look. We all were blondes with dark brown eyebrows. We didn't see black people in our town. To have someone routinely going up to Karen's apartment who was pretty different from everybody there. I mean, this one young man was just outraged by the whole thing. And he had at least talked about maybe trying to pick Bill off. You know, with a gun.”

## C O N N E C T I O N S

Stephanie Coontz writes that when many people today are asked to describe a traditional family, they refer to the Nelsons (“Ozzie and Harriet”), the Cleavers (“Leave It to Beaver”), the Andersons (“Father Knows Best”), and other families on TV sitcoms. Why do you think they point to a fictional family rather than a real one? Both Karen Wilson and Bill Sims grew up in the 1950s. To what extent have the families they knew as children shaped their ideas about family and family life? To what extent are

their ideas about family and family life traditional? To what extent have they broken with tradition?



Interview adults who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s to find out how TV has shaped their beliefs about family life. How does television shape your attitudes and values about family life? How does it shape the attitudes and values of other people you know?



Coontz notes that the kind of family life that evolved in the 1950s did not exist in earlier periods in American history. She also notes that it was not “idyllic.”

In important ways, the stability of family and community life during the 1950s rested on pervasive discrimination against women, gays, political dissidents, non-Christians, and racial or ethnic minorities, as well as a systematic cover-up of the underside of many families. Families that were harmonious and fair of their own free will may have been able to function more easily in the fifties, but few alternatives existed for members of discordant or oppressive families. Victims of child abuse, alcoholism, spousal rape, and wife battering had no recourse, no place to go, until well into the 1960s.

What does it mean to be nostalgic for a family that never really existed? Synonyms for the word *nostalgic* include sentimental, longing, yearning, emotional, romantic, homesick, and regretful. Which word or words best describes how many Americans today view the fifties? If the strength of a family or a community rests on discrimination, how strong is that family or community?

A white teacher who grew up in 1950s recalls that “racist jokes and behaviors were normal during my high school years.” Yet he knew little about African Americans until he went to college. There his encounters with blacks “began quietly to invade the roots of my racism; before long, the entire tree was

sick. And dying.” Still he writes, “I cannot claim to be free of all racism; after all, there is something unpleasantly permanent about many experiences and lessons of our childhood.” What prompted the teacher to change his views of African Americans? What does he mean when he says that “there is something unpleasantly permanent about many experiences and lessons of our childhood”? To what degree are we bound by the way we are reared? By the way we are educated?



Why do you think Julius Lester views segregation as “a deathly spiritual violence”? What forms did that violence take? How did that “spiritual violence” affect the relationship between Karen Wilson and Bill Sims? What are the legacies of those years? To what extent have those legacies shaped Cicily’s experiences at Colgate?



Like Cicily Wilson and Chaney Sims, Jonah Edelman is biracial. His mother is black and his father is white. He believes that his identity is shaped by not only his family and interests but also the era in which he lives. He writes.

Born in 1970, I am indebted more than most to the civil rights movement and the struggles of many, like my mother, who exposed and fought racism despite inordinate risks. In fact, I think, had there been no civil rights movement, I would not be the person I am today. My parents might

**To what degree  
are we bound  
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are reared?**

**How does the era in which we live shape our identity?**

still have met in Mississippi in 1967, gotten married in 1968, and had three children. Josh first, Jonah (me) in the middle, and Ezra last. In the absence of the civil rights period, though, the person that I have become—the cultural mulatto, the well-to-do Black liberal wary of the political process, the sheltered Bar-Mitzvah boy who has struggled with his blackness—never would have existed. Society, I do not believe, would have allowed someone of such a diverse heritage to develop.<sup>4</sup>

What do you know about other families in your community? About families who live in other communities? How did you learn those things? How have people in other neighborhoods learned about your family? How do you think documentaries like *An American Love Story* shape the way Americans think about families and family life? What stereotypes does it challenge? What questions does it raise about the way families grow and change? About the difficulties in generalizing about families or trying to label them?

How does the era in which we live shape our identity? How did the 1950s and 1960s shape the identities of Bill Sims and Karen Wilson? How did the 1970s and 1980s shape Cicily's identity? How do you think the 1980s and 1990s has shaped Chaney's identity?



Suppose you were asked to make a documentary about your family. What aspects of your family's daily life are viewers most likely to notice? What might they fail to see or understand? How might you help them see your family through your eyes?



<sup>1</sup> From *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* by Gerard Jones. Grove Press, 1992, 87-91.

<sup>2</sup> From *The Way We Really Are* by Stephanie Coontz. Basic Books, 1997, 44.

<sup>3</sup> From *Falling Pieces of the Broken Sky* by Julius Lester. Little Brown, 1990, 69.

<sup>4</sup> From "Foreword" by Jonah Martin Edelman in *The Measure of Our Success* by Marian Wright Edelman. Beacon Press, 1992, x-xi.