
Biracial Discrimination Recounted: A Deep Dive into *The Meaning of Mariah Carey*

Galant Nanta Adhitya¹, Erischa Rahayu Putri¹, Yohanes Angie Kristiawan¹
¹Universitas Respati Yogyakarta, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

✉: angiekristiawan@respati.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Mariah Carey is an American singer and songwriter; whose mother is white, but her father is black. In 2020, she released *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* retracks Carey's life as a biracial woman. This article explains how she is discriminated and reacts to the discrimination. The theories employed are Post-National American Studies; Blank, Dabady, and Citro's types of discrimination; and Aguirre and Turner's reaction to discrimination. When she was a kid, teenager, and young adult, the discrimination she endures is more intentional and explicit. The discrimination becomes subtler and more indirect, as she has cemented her status as a musical icon. The fact that she is still discriminated even after she has reached the peak of her superstardom suggests that biracial discrimination can happen to any mixed-race person, regardless of their socioeconomic class. Discrimination comes from both sides of the race. The article signifies how the discrimination faced by mixed-raced people are both similar, but also different from the experiences of other minorities.

Keywords: *autobiography; mulatto; popular culture; popular literature*

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INTRODUCTION

Mariah Carey is an American singer with international fame. Since her self-titled album

debuted in 1990, she has been famous for her vocal acrobats. She has received many accolades, including five Grammys and ten American Music

Awards, for her singing abilities. Guinness World Records even crowns her "Songbird Supreme" for her five-octave range (Carras, 2019).

However, the general public do not know that Carey is also the songwriter for most of the songs she sings. She co-wrote 18 out of 19 of her songs that topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart (Brandle, 2020). Her songwriting ability was only recognized in 2020 when she was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame (n.d.).

That same year, Carey also released an autobiography, co-written by Michaela Angela Davis, entitled *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* (2020). It received critical acclaim and commercial success as it became the New York Times best seller during its initial week (Kaufman, 2020). There were even rumors that it would be adapted into a biopic (Gonzales, 2020).

The autobiography tells Carey's life from childhood to adulthood in an unchronological order. She was born in 1969 to interracial parents. Her mother is of Irish descent, while her father is of African-Venezuelan descent. As a biracial woman, she falls into the 'mulatta' category (Andaloro, 2020).

When her parents got divorced, Carey was taken by her mother. Because Carey has a light skin tone, people perceive her as white. When her neighbors in the White neighborhood found out her father was African American, their treatment toward her changed (Hines, 2020). She also recounts that she was not fully embraced by the African-American community. She was considered not black enough to belong with them.

Biracial people have different experiences than other minority groups. On one hand, white supremacy can still be felt from how they treat biracial people. Historically, the 'One Drop Rule' assigns anybody whose lineage is known or can be traced to African ancestors classified as 'People of Color' (Davis, 1991, 6).

On the other hand, biracial people are treated differently by African Americans (Payne, 2019). They were alienated because they did not share physical similarities or similar struggles. The alienation that comes from both sides makes them vulnerable to discrimination.

Discrimination towards biracial people is important to be studied. As the world continues to be interconnected, interracial marriages have

become common (Davenport, 2016). Using an autobiography as the research object can paint an accurate picture of the phenomenon. As a literary genre following factual events (Sollosi, 2020), the discriminatory incidents described in it occurred in reality.

This research is the first to analyze *The Meaning of Mariah Carey*. The problem formulated is "How did Mariah Carey overcome the discrimination she faced, as described in her autobiography?". It aims (1) to examine the ways she was discriminated, and (2) to examine her ways of fighting discrimination as described in her autobiography.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative content analysis method. It is conducted under

the scope of Post-Nationalist American Studies. This paradigm seeks to revise the cultural nationalism and celebration of exceptionalism that tends to dominate the US and shifts the focus to phenomena related to minorities, such as gender, race, class, and multiculturalism. It also focuses on the meeting point

between consumption formations and mass culture (Adi, 2023, p. 100).

American Studies is an interdisciplinary discipline. A phenomenon does not simply manifest as if it were in a vacuum. A myriad of things contribute to its manifestation. Thus, it needs to be studied from the perspective of several scientific disciplines simultaneously to produce unified and comprehensive findings. This research then employs three theories.

(1) Critical Race Theory (CRT), proposed by Rollock and Gillborn (2011), is used to frame this research. CRT focuses on social conceptions of race and ethnicity. It considers racism to be systemic in various laws and regulations, and not just based on individual prejudice. Therefore, the central principle of CRT: (a) Centrality of Racism, (b) White Supremacy, (c) Voices of People of Color, (d) Interest Convergence, and (e) Intersectionality. can explain the social, political, and legal structures and distribution of power that create discrimination.

To examine further about discrimination, (2) types of discrimination will be

explained using Blank, Dabady, and Citro's *Measuring Racial Discrimination* (2004). They divide discrimination into four types, namely: (a) Intentional, explicit discrimination, which includes verbal antagonism, avoidance, segregation, physical attack, and extermination; (b) Subtle, unconscious, automatic discrimination, which includes subtle prejudice, indirect prejudice, ambivalence and automatic prejudice; (c) Statistical discrimination and profiling; and (d) Organizational processes.

In addition to the type of discrimination, this research will also discuss (3) types of reactions when faced with discrimination, using Aguirre and Turner's *American Ethnicity: The Dynamics and Consequences of Discrimination* (2004). They classify reactions to discrimination into: (a) passive acceptance, (b) marginal participation, (c) assimilation, (d) ethnogenesis, (e) withdrawal and self-segregation, (f) rebellion and revolt, and (g) organized protest.

The data for the type of and reaction to discrimination are quoted from the autobiography. To prove a clear presentation of the data, parts of the quotation showing the type of discrimination will be

presented in italics. Meanwhile, parts of the quotation indicating the reaction to discrimination will be underlined.

DISCUSSION

An analysis on *The Meaning of Mariah Carey* from the CRT perspective emphasizes the relationship between Whites, Blacks, and biracial people. Observing the interactions among them can yield the existence of discrimination and the reactions of discriminated people.

The autobiography retracks Carey's life from when she was born to when it was published. From the start, she has drawn how her mother's and father's respective race wrecked their marriage.

But before I was born, the Carey family consisted of a Black father, a white mother, and a mixed boy and girl. The four of them would walk down the street, and people would know. *This rebel Carey quartet experienced the spectacular ignorance and wrath of a society woefully unprepared to receive or accept them;*

...

But she lived firsthand the discomfort and animosity directed at her and her offbeat Black and white family. She saw their neighbors throw raw meat studded with broken glass to

their dogs, and their family car blown up.

...

Order and obedience was how my father tried to make sense out of the chaos of society and the rubble his family structure had become.

(Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 62-8)

The society as a whole discriminates the family in the form of segregation. Not only did they alienate the Careys, but they also actively pushed them to move out.

As the head of the family, Mariah's father turns to ethnogenesis for them to persist and survive the alienation. Black parents educate their children about anti-Black. They thus can navigate their conducts frictionlessly (Ellis & McKend, 2021).

Leading up to the Civil Rights Movement in 1964, racial issues grew extremely intense (Carson, 2023). The abolishment of segregation had not yet come into effect. In some states, interracial marriage is still prohibited (Head, 2021).

What the Careys experienced is caused by what was happening in the US. "*As a result of the hostility from their community and country*" (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 62), they had to

move thirteen times growing up. Thirteen times to pack up and go, to try to find another place—a better place, a safer place. Thirteen new starts, thirteen new streets with new houses full of people to judge you and wonder where or who your father is. Thirteen occasions to be labeled unworthy and discarded, to be placed on the outside. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 9)

At the time, there was nothing that the Careys could do to challenge the discrimination. Withdrawal is what they resort to as a form of reaction.

Moreover, racism affects the biracial family in a distinctive way (Brook, 2021). They receive discriminative treatment from both sides of the race. It gives rise to internal discrimination inside the family itself.

My sister, Alison, and brother, Morgan, were both older and darker, and not just in terms of the hues of their skin, though they were slightly browner. The two of them had a similar energy that seemed to block light. They had an approach to the world that made little room for whimsy and fantasy, which was my natural tendency. *We shared common blood, yet I felt like a stranger among them all, an intruder in my own family.*

I was always so scared as a little girl, and music was my escape. My house was heavy, weighed down with yelling and chaos. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 5)

The physical characteristics of children resulting from interracial couples can resemble their mother, father, or a mixture of both. Mariah's skin complexion is the fairest. Her siblings internalize avoidance, thinking she is their white mother's favorite, and are jealous of her. Mariah's reaction was self-segregation because fighting discrimination from one's own kind is difficult (Rogers, 2020).

What was taking place at home was nothing compared to what was happening outside.

One night, while left alone, I was watching a special on 20/20 about children being kidnapped—totally inappropriate for a six-year-old. And it so happened that at that moment, *some kids in the neighborhood decided to throw rocks at the window. Their voices broke through the dark night, chanting, "Mariah, we're gonna get you!"* I was terrified by the news, by the kids, by the night, by the house, by my absolute aloneness. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 13)

Carey was subjected to physical attack and verbal

antagonism from other kids in the white neighborhood because she did not physically look as white as them. Her reaction is in the form of passive acceptance because she did not actively take action to get over or change the situation.

Discrimination also happened to Carey at school.

"Why are you laughing?" I asked.

Through her giggles, one of them replied, "Oh, Mariah, you used the wrong crayon! You didn't mean to do that!" She was pointing at where I'd drawn my father.

As they kept laughing, I looked down at the picture of my family I had lovingly and diligently been creating. I'd used the peach crayon for the skin of myself, my mother, my sister, and my brother. I'd used a brown crayon for my father. ... I was humiliated and confused. What had I done so wrong?

Still cackling hysterically, the teachers insisted, "You used the wrong crayon!" Every time one of them made the declaration the whole gang laughed, laughed, and laughed some more. A debilitating kind of disgrace was pressing down on me, yet I managed to pull myself up slowly, eyes burning and brimming with hot tears.

As calmly as I could, I told the teachers, "No. I didn't use the wrong crayon."

Refusing to even give me the dignity of addressing me directly, one of them said to the other snidely, "She doesn't even know she's using the wrong crayon!" The laughter and taunting seemed like it would never end. I stood glaring up at them, working very hard not to vomit from embarrassment. But despite my nausea, I did not break my glare. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 35-6)

The centrality of racism influences the way Carey's teacher and friends think. Due to her fair skin tone, they assume that she is white, without black descent. The automatic prejudice can be seen from the teacher's reaction when first finding out that Carey's father is Black. Despite being a pupil, Carey still speaks up to the teachers, who are her superior. This marginal participation shows her determination to clarify her biracial background.

As Carey grew older, the discrimination from her schoolmates got worse.

They called over to me: "Come on, Mariah. Let's go back here." Without question, I followed. They led me to what I thought would be a playroom or a den (I knew wealthy people had dens). It was a smaller room in the rear of the house, a guest

room perhaps. One of them shut the door with a click, and suddenly the mood grew heavy, fast. I thought maybe they'd snuck in some alcohol or something. But there was no excitement, no naughty, girly energy. Instead, all the girls were glaring at me. Suddenly, into the heavy silence, *the sister of the prettiest girl spit out her ugly secret for all to hear: "You're a nigger!"*

My head began to spin when I realized she was referring to me. Pointing at me. It was my secret, my shame. I was frozen. The others quickly joined in. "You're a nigger!" they all shrieked. All together, in unison, they chanted, "You're a nigger!" over and over. I thought it would never end. The venom and hate with which these girls spewed this new iteration of their usual chant was so strong, it quite literally lifted me out of my body.

...
I was also scared my mother might make a massive public scene and make navigating life at school even more difficult for me. I had no language or coping skills for any of it. ... But for this I had no defense. I was not only outnumbered and isolated, but I was also bitterly betrayed. This was not your garden-variety schoolyard meangirl scuffle. It was a devious and violent premeditated assault by girls I called my friends. I never spoke of it. I stuffed

it inside. I had to find a way to survive those girls, that town, my family, and my pain. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 89-90)

The discrimination involves a derogatory racist insult. Not only to embarrass Carey, but the verbal antagonism also carries the demeaning intent to spread. She becomes powerless both because of her inability to fight back and because of her fear of her mother. She reacts with passive acceptance because she feels inferior to her white mother.

Her inferiority is later heightened when she is discriminated by Black children.

I was quite young and at a publicly funded New York City summer sleepaway camp for kids. Let's just say, it was not the most organized, and the staff were practically kids themselves. It was predominately Black, and I was one of the very few mixed or light-skinned children there, and the only blondish one. But I most certainly was not having more fun. *Rather, I was a flash point for animosity. None of the girls liked me. Why are they mad at me? I wondered.* I didn't understand, then. It wasn't just the light skin and blondish hair-if that weren't enough, Khalil liked me. ... He had dark, curly

brown hair, caramel skin, and greenish eyes.

...

I carried that less-than-ideal experience of being at a public camp with me. It inspired me to conceive Camp Mariah, a summer camp focused on career awareness. I intimately understood there were countless children who didn't have access to resources at their hands, space under their feet, and sky above their heads. The first fundraiser was a Christmas concert at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in Harlem in 1994, where I performed "All I Want for Christmas Is You" live for the first time. It stood as one of the largest fundraisers ever for the Fresh Air Fund, Camp Mariah's amazing partner. The Fresh Air Fund's Camp Mariah allowed me to create what I didn't have for thousands of deserving children. It has been not only fulfilling but healing. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 309-10)

Living with her mother demonstrates Mariah how different they are. However, being around other Black children also proves that she is not one of them either. This ambivalence triggers confusion for biracial people. Their identity is constructed not by how they identify themselves, but by how they are identified by others. Another instance exhibits its effect.

A deeply suppressed sadness I had buried inside since *the first painful blow from someone saying I was not white enough or Black enough, which translated into "not good enough," both rose and began to dissolve, and a longing to connect took its place.* (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 189-90)

Mariah reacts to how she was made to feel being a biracial child materializes when she is an adult. Once her career is solidified, she sets up a foundation, so other children do not go through what she went through. This reaction can be categorized as organized protest because it requires a collective effort to safely change patterns of discrimination.

Nevertheless, the more discrimination she receives, the more courage she has.

It was certainly not the first time *I had been degraded by my schoolmates. I'd been singled out on the school bus and spit on. I'd gotten into physical fights. Often, I would clap back; my tongue was sharp, and I could be a real wiseass. Sometimes I even started fights.* (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 90)

She handles the physical attack better in the form of revolt, both physically and verbally.

Once she finds her calling, she works hard to make it happen.

However, Carey's career does not take off in a meteoritical rise. From the start, discrimination impels people to doubt her vision of life.

I remember that once, one of the most popular jocks in the school asked me what I was doing after graduation. I usually didn't tell any of the kids around about my dreams, but in this case I did. *I told him I was going to be a singer and songwriter. His reaction was, "Yeah, right; you'll be working at HoJo's in five years."* (HoJo's was short for Howard Johnson's, the chain of hotels and restaurants that was still widely popular then.) The degradation was totally intended.

As it turns out, in less than three years, in a simple black dress, with a head full of curls and a stomach full of, yes, butterflies, I walked through a packed stadium among the deafening buzz of tens of thousands of voices. A loud, clear voice cut through the cacophony: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Columbia recording artist Mariah Carey for the singing of "America the Beautiful." The piano track was recorded by Richard T. I held the little mic and sang that big song with everything I had. I hit a really high note on "sea

to shining sea," and the stadium erupted.

When I finished, the announcer said, "The Palace now has a queen, and the goosebumps will continue." It was Game 1 of the NBA finals, between Detroit and Portland. I knew the jock who condemned me to HoJo's ... and everyone who had looked down on me, and millions of Americans were watching. None on the players, none of the fans knew who I was when I walked in, but they would remember me when I walked out. A victory. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 89-90)

Her mixed-race background raises verbal antagonism that dreaming of being a well-known figure in the music industry is a mere fantasy. She reacts to the discrimination with rebellion. She breaks through the glass ceiling that usually limits minority groups.

Cynicism about Mariah's career trajectory even comes from her mother.

We were driving and bopping along with the song when my mother broke out into Michael's signature part of the chorus. "I always feel like Somebody's watching me."

She sang it in an elaborate, operatic style, and I turned my face to the window to hide my giggle. I mean, it's a very eighties R & B record, with the hook sung in Michael Jackson's impeccably

smooth signature style, so to hear it delivered like Beverly Sills (a popular Brooklyn-born operatic soprano from the 1950s to the 1970s) was pretty hilarious to my teenage singer's ears.

Oh, but Mother was not amused. She whipped the volume knob down and glared at me, her brownish-green eyes narrowing and hardening to stone.

"What's so funny?" she spat. Her seriousness quickly swallowed up the silliness of the moment. I stuttered, "Um, well ... that's just not how it goes." She stared at me until every bit of lightness faded. Almost growling, she said, "You should only hope that one day you become half the singer I am." My heart dropped.

...
These words were there in my heart in 1999 when I was acknowledged and respected for my voice and my compositions by two of the greatest opera talents of all time. I was invited to join Luciano Pavarotti in "Pavarotti & Friends," a prestigious annual fundraising concert for children in war-torn countries, hosted by the great tenor, the maestro, in his hometown of Modena, Italy.

...
Then, in May 2005, I met the phenomenal soprano Leontyne Price (the first Black woman to become a prima donna at

the Metropolitan Opera and the most awarded classical singer) when she was being honored at Oprah's illustrious Legends Ball, which celebrated twenty-five African American women in art, entertainment, and civil rights. ...

I guess to my mother, I may not have been half the singer she was, but I was the whole singer and artist I was. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 58-80)

The verbal antagonism is driven by white supremacy. Other races, including mixed race, are thus deemed less capable. Mariah's reaction is considered ethnogenesis. She composes her own style of singing and writing her songs, mixing the white pop genre with black elements.

As her talent catches the attention of a music mogul, Carey is earmarked to a certain mold for marketing purposes.

Apart from the ambition, Tommy and I were completely different, and the Black part of myself caused him confusion. From the moment Tommy signed me, *he tried to wash the "urban" (translation: Black) off of me.* And it was no different when it came to the music. The songs on my very first demo, which would become my first smash album, were much more soulful, raw, and modern in their original state. *Just as he did with*

my appearance, Tommy smoothed out the songs for Sony, trying to make them more general, more "universal," more ambiguous. I always felt like he wanted to convert me into what he understood- a "mainstream" (meaning white) artist. For instance, he never wanted me to wear my hair straight. I think to him it didn't look naturally straight, it looked straightened. He thought it made me look too "urban" (translation: Black) or R & B, like Faith Evans. Instead, he insisted that I always wear my loose and bouncy curls, which I think he thought made me look almost like an Italian girl (though, ironically, my curls are a direct result of my Black DNA, assisted by a good small-barrel curling wand to integrate the frizz).

My curls had certainly crisscrossed with Italian culture before I met Tommy. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 147-8)

A music executive treats Carey with automatic prejudice. Her ambiguous appearance is whitewashed to shield her black heredity. Assimilation is how she reacts to the discrimination. She lets her management strategically brand her fitting to a suitable market. At the same time, she lets people know her ancestry any chance she gets.

Against all odds, Carey ascends to fame. She achieves success and accolades for her aptitudes. Nonetheless, her achievements do not guarantee the respect she deserves.

When I played "Honey" for Tommy, he quipped, "Well, I'm glad you were so inspired." The bitterness! I was like, "What? Now you're mad? Why didn't you get mad about 'Fantasy' or 'Dreamlover'?" It's blatantly obvious I wasn't talking about Tommy in that song! I wasn't talking about him, or any actual person, in practically any romantic song. Before I met Derek, they were mostly imaginary characters. I'm sure Tommy could sense that the songs written for *Butterfly* were no longer about far-off, fictional lovers—these songs, though certainly poetically embellished, were full of specific details and sensual realness.

Tommy and the label were also resistant to what my new sound represented. Again I heard the refrain "too urban," which of course was code for "too Black"—and yeah, I wasn't ever going back. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 208-10)

Besides her biracial background, gender also adds another layer to the discrimination Carey suffers. The automatic prejudice manifests to discredit her competences as a mulatta. With

more audacity, she then reacts with rebellion and revolt. As a biracial woman, she interpolates her music with Hip-Hop elements and collaborates with black rappers. She also left the label as soon as her contractual responsibilities were done.

In the new label, Carey has more freedom in artistic choices. As she has cemented her status as a musical icon, the discrimination becomes subtler and more indirect. The discrimination was worse before her career was launched.

Some of my earliest memories are of violent moments. Because of that, I have always carried a heavy blanket with which I cover up large pieces of my childhood. It has been a burden. But I can no longer stand the weight of that blanket and the silence of the little girl smothering beneath it. I am a grown woman now, with a little girl and boy of my own.

...
This book is a testimony to the resilience of silenced little girls and boys everywhere: To insist that we believe them. To honor their experiences and tell their stories. (Carey & Davis, 2020, p. 4)

After three decades into her career, music becomes her saving grace from racism. In

retrospect, the discrimination she endures is more intentional and explicit when she was a kid, teenager, and young adult and she mostly shook it off. By way of reaction, writing her autobiography serves as an organized protest. Her goal is for other biracial girls to not experience what she experienced.

CONCLUSION

The biracial discrimination that Carey encountered when she was a kid might not be idiosyncratic to her. Other mixed-race people, either in or outside of the US, undoubtedly experience such discrimination as well. However, she is still discriminated even after she has reached the peak of her superstardom. It suggests that biracial discrimination can happen to any mixed-race people, regardless of their socioeconomic class. It can also be concluded that the more secure a biracial person's position, the less hostile the discrimination they face and the more bravery they have in their reaction.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and

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