



“The Little Things”:

Race as Social Problem or Social Phenomenon? Understanding Racial Identities from an Asian/White Perspective

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Introduction

In 2000, for the first time, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the US allowed individuals to identify with more than one race for the census, despite a highly-contested debate.¹ In 2000 census, 2.4% of the population (6,826,228 individuals) identified as being from “two or more races”², while in the 2010 census, 2.91% of the population (9,009,073) did the same³. The OMB has also stated that the “Two or more Races population was one of the fastest-growing groups over the decade”.⁴ These significant numbers certainly serve to reinforce the importance of multiracial and mixed-race studies, especially in the United States. As Ifekwunigwe noted in 2004, “[m]ixed race’ studies is one of the fastest growing, as well as one of the most important and controversial areas in the field of ‘race’ and ethnic relations” (18).

While there has been an increasing number of studies carried out on multiracial individuals and groups, I suggest that there are two main gaps in extant research. The first is the focus on how these individuals are treated, often emphasising aspects of marginality, inequality, discrimination, and a lack of visibility. These studies examine the “plight” of the multiracial individual, and can perhaps be traced back most notably to Everett Stonequist’s discussions of the “marginal man” (1937). I suggest that in contemporary times, academic research should also focus on the

everyday nature of multiracial experiences and identities. Certainly, this is not to diminish the power of examining marginality and exclusion. In this paper, however, I hope to demonstrate a changing trend in certain groups of multiracial identities. Secondly, I suggest that especially within the US, there is a focus on black/white multiraciality. This is a fascinating body of literature, examining the complexities of race/ethnicity, community, identity, economics, politics and culture. It is also certainly expected, considering the deep significance and specific history of African migration and black identity. Again though, there is a gap in the literature with respect to non-black/white identities and experiences in a country that focuses heavily on the black/white dichotomy. I examine Asian/white multiracial individuals, and suggest that they present a very different approach and understanding of multiraciality, as well as how the framework around race is understood in the US.

In this paper, I examine how Asian/white multiracial students negotiate their identity through interaction with groups and individuals throughout their lives. I conclude that in 2012, and for these college-educated students, race plays merely a small role in their lives, emerging only through the “little things”⁵ that remind them that they are different. Importantly, I wish to highlight several things. Firstly, my respondents describe “race” being understood differently in the US and East Asian countries, and I suggest that appearance is crucial in the US racial framework.

Secondly, I argue that my respondents' experiences contribute to a changing understanding of "whiteness", as the experiences my respondents go through are similar to the processes of how Southern/Central Europeans, Irish and Jews were incorporated into "whiteness". Thirdly, I emphasise the everyday aspect of race, following the processual nature of Omi and Winant's theory on racial formation, where racial categories are being constantly created by larger structures interacting with micro-level interactions. I hope that my case study demonstrates the theory of racial formation, while also moving the arguments away from racial hegemony, and incorporating everyday life aspects into it. Finally, being treated as "different" is significantly different from being marginalised. Many of my respondents claim they do not face racism or inequality, but feel that these differences are neutral. Race, in contemporary US, can be seen not merely as a social problem, but also a social phenomenon. It continues to permeate everyday life, while not necessarily always presenting a constant challenge.

Mixed race and marginalisation

Much of the focus on mixed race studies examines how individuals are marginalised, because of their ability to cross racial boundaries – they are part of at least two races, and at the same time part of none. For example, Williams-Leon and Nakashima write that "[i]n popular discourse, literature, and the social sciences, mixed-race people have been definitely and problematically characterised as either products of interracial procreation or mere extensions of their monoracial parent groups" (2001: 57). Literature has included abstract writings on the "pathology" of the "mulatto". Ifekwunigwe describes this age as the modern "Age of Pathology" in the 19th century, where the "marriage of discourses on biology and culture [...] lends so much weight to the contemporary persistence of the idea of 'hybridity' as the sexual transgression of so-called pure 'racial' boundaries" (2004:8). Nakashima also writes that in the 19th century Eurasians/Amerasians were described in popular literature as "tragic mulattos/mulattas", and as wanting to be white in the 20th century (2001). Up till the

1970s, work on mixed race was still treated in this manner. Gist and Dworkin write in the same vein as Stonequist, noting for example, that "minority peoples, racially distinct from the majority, often suffer serious handicaps as they become subjected to prejudice and discrimination and are objects of hostility or indifference. Often this is true of minority peoples of dual or multiple racial heritage" (1972:1), while Spickard writes that people of mixed parentage "have long suffered from a negative public image" (2004: 150).

In the 1990s, along with the wave of postmodernism that swept much of academia (especially race and gender/queer theory), the literature began focusing on anthologies of experiences, examining how racial identities are created and identified with. This is where the most popular and well-known writings on mixed race in America come from, such as Root's two anthologies (1992, 1996) and Naomi Zack's work (1993). Camper, for instance, writes in 1994 that there is "an increasing urgency in the lives of many women to end isolation and to understand racial multiplicity within our own bodies, families and cultures [...] more and more young mixed race women were experiencing a difficult and sometimes lonely struggle to find identity" (2004: 176).

Ifekwunigwe suggests a third "Age of Critique" in the late 1990s and 2000s, where "scholars continue to grapple with unresolved tensions between identification and categorisation and structure and agency" (2004:8). I suggest that even recently, much work continues to focus exclusively on marginalisation, such as Ali (2003), and various edited works (Parker and Song 2001, Williams-León and Nakashima 2001, Olumide 2002, Ifekwunigwe 2004, among others). For example, Ropp's chapter in Ifekwunigwe's volume (2004) describes experiences of multiracial Asians, and concludes by discussing the link between denying race and stopping racism. When not discussing explicit inequality, works touch on the lost and confused feelings multiracial individuals have, leading to greater experiences and feelings of exclusion and marginality.

There has also been a constant discussion of civil rights and visibility. Root describes how the US suppresses the "historical reality that a significant

proportion of its citizenry has multigenerational multiracial roots” (2004: 145); she suggests that there is little discussion of multiraciality because of the US’s history of anti-miscegenation laws and rules on hypodescent, and declares that “to name oneself is to validate one’s existence and declare visibility” (2004: 145). Williams, too, describes how multiracial individuals “live along the *fronteras* of passing and no passing. They pass and get passed upon [...] One day, the debate on passing will become obsolete (will pass), when Asian-descent multiracials can express the full range of their humanity in which boundaries of race, ethnicity, nation, class, gender, sexuality, body, and language can be crossed and transgressed without judgment, without scorn, and without detriment” (2004: 169, emphasis in original). Camper also feels the need for political action: “I think it is important for mixed people who have White ancestry to not identify only as mixed but to stress identity with their coloured ancestry [...] We should not be forced into a ‘closet’ about White or any other parentage, but we must recognise that our location is as women of colour.” (2004: 181). Additionally, in most writings about race in general, inequality and discrimination is a theme that is heavily emphasised. Omi and Winant’s ground-breaking theory of racial formation (1994) aims to lead towards understanding *racism*, and finding ways to overcome this discrimination.

However, I suggest that a different approach can be taken, that more accurately reflects a wider variety of experiences and identities. Parker and Song write that “[s]ubjected to racially based representations, paternalism, violence and exclusions, many people are choosing to embrace a multiracial identity. This identity resists White racial hegemony which imposes racial categories, yet also resists notions of purity from within their monoracial communities of colour.” (2001: 112). Yet, while the previous foci are certainly valid and still need to be examined, experiences on the ground have shifted slightly, and not all multiracial people feel the same. In 2012, and for certain mixed race individuals such as my respondents, their experiences are far less about marginalisation and exclusion, than it is about feeling occasionally different. For my respondents, race was not a main aspect of

their identity, and many were nonchalant and neutral towards racial issues. Most described the “little things” that remind them of their Asian-ness and their difference, but felt no discrimination from community or the state. Rather than feeling “white” or “Asian”, many felt that race simply was not an issue. While there were occasional experiences of feeling different, crucially, the overwhelming majority of my respondents did not feel this “difference” was enough to warrant much thought, discussion or political action. As Gist and Dworkin do note, “[s]ome marginal peoples, or at least those of mixed race, experience social rejection [...] others do not.” (1972: 14); Tizard and Phoenix also note that “only a minority of our sample approximated to [marginality being inherently painful and accompanied by a confused or negative identity]” (2002: 114). Rather than seeing mixed race and issues of race merely as social problems, I suggest that we can also approach race as a social phenomenon – as a part of identity and experiences that, for the individual, does not necessarily include feelings of inequality. With regards to racial formation, I contend that we can continue the theory of the processes that lead to race, but also that discussions of race can also focus on themes not relating to inequality.

By focusing on everyday life experiences, I propose that analysis can reveal how individuals interpret and negotiate their identities, seemingly separate from the often-examined themes of discrimination. As Ferguson highlights, serious “sociological work on almost any aspect of contemporary society [...] cannot afford to neglect the dimension of everyday life” (2009: 31). While the basis of racial categories is certainly rooted in discrimination and power struggles, social scientists must also take into consideration how race is actually experienced and understood on the ground. As Olu-mide writes, “what has been lacking [...] is why so little effort has been made to collect the views of those so defined in *their own terms*. Agendas for the study of mixed race have tended to be formulated in terms of pathology, or inadequacy, or insurmountable difficulty” (2002: 4). While many multiracial individuals certainly do continue to face discrimination, it has to be accepted that many others do not, or at least do not think that they do. For my respondents, it is

through the “little things” and everyday occurrences that race is brought to their attention.

At this point, I would like to state briefly that occasional feelings of exclusion and being “different” certainly link to bigger issues of marginality. This certainly problematizes how “American” Asians can truly be. However, my goal in this paper is to focus on personal interpretations of experience, to better connect theories of mixed race, and race in general, to experiences on the ground. However, still relating to inequality, I ask: why don’t my respondents feel marginalised or discriminated against? Why do these “little things” not necessarily build up to political action? Though my respondents’ everyday experiences do not necessarily include race, I suggest that on a larger structural level, race continues to permeate the everyday. The collection of individual peoples’ “little things” leads to the conclusion that race is not a primary identity for my respondents, but yet plays a constant (though unchallenging) part.

What else can we do with multiracial studies?

Studies on multiraciality have been generally used to either call for political action (as Root’s anthologies do), or to deconstruct existing racial categories. As Ifekwunigwe writes, “What was striking to me then [1993] and now [2004] is the presumption that the ‘races’ being ‘mixed’ are themselves discrete and pure” (2004:2). Parker and Song suggest that mixed-race people help to problematize our ideas of what “race” actually refers to; Spickard writes on the “illogic of American racial categories” (1993), Nakashima (2001) suggests that multiracial individuals can help deconstruct American racial categories, while Spencer (1999) feels that multiracial experiences can “transcend” race. Much literature revolves around the future of race, asking whether America will end up in a post-racial world where everyone is “mixed”, and where race will no longer matter.

However, I suggest that studies of multiracial individuals can also go in another way. While perhaps outside of the social sciences, “races” are still often taken to be concrete bounded categories (though the

complication of “Hispanic” and the OMB’s allowance of citizens to tick more than one race are slowly changing that), within social sciences and especially sociology, most are already aware of this. In fact, even as far back as the early 1900s, W.I. Thomas wrote that “[t]he ‘races’ of Europe are all mongrel, and are classified on the basis of language and custom” (1966: 213). I use the multiracial experience to examine the *changing* nature of “race” in the US with its particular framework of interpretation, the dynamism of what “whiteness” can encompass, and the relationship between “American” and “white”. As my multiracial respondents describe, race is becoming less of an issue because it no longer makes sense to them – this is in opposition to the Asian Americans I interviewed, for whom race was still an important primary identity. My multiracial respondents are accepted as white (or in the American context, “raceless”) most of the time. I argue that this is a situation unique to college-educated East/Asian white students, due to factors including phenotypical characteristics, how they were raised, and their peer networks. Additionally, this brings up the changing nature of “whiteness”. As Glazer has written, “Whether the mother or the father is black, the majority of children of an intermarried couple are reported to the census as black. In contrast, the majority of the children of intermarried couples in which the non-white parent is Indian or Asian are reported to be white. The new groups are thus not only becoming white in terms of social status; considering their high intermarriage rates, and the way they report the race of their children, they are becoming white in census terms.” (Glazer 2001: 77)

The Asian/White mix in America

Often, “race” refers to black and white relations in the US, and studies of mixed race people “are by or about people who are of Black and White ancestry, not other ethnic ancestries” (Parker and Song 2001: 14); this observation has been noted also by Hall and Turner (2001), Ifekwunigwe (2004), Hoskins (2011) and Zack (2004). This is unsurprising, considering the specific complexities of black/white relations, as well as rules around hypodescent.⁶ However, it is clear that

the experience of the multiracial individual is incredibly varied across historical factors.⁷ Some multiracial groups have formed around their heritage, such as the Eurasians in Southeast Asia and Burghers in Sri Lanka. The Asian/White mix in the US does not have a community to fall back on, and has a considerably different experience.

The US has five official “races” on its census – “White”, “Black/African American”, “American Indian and Alaska Native”, “Asian”, and “Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander”. In the 2010 census, 4.8% (14,674,252) of the population was Asian, and 0.9% (2,646,604) were described as “Asian in combination”. While these numbers might seem underwhelming, this translates to 15% of all people who include Asian in their race. Multiracial Asians represent about 18% of all people who identified with more than one race, significant considering Asians make up only 4.8% of the population. Additionally, the 2010 census brief describes that “Asians who reported multiple races grew at a faster rate than the Asian alone population”.⁸ The Asian/White mix is the most predominant, with 61.3% of the “Asian in combination” population identifying as Asian and White. Importantly, “those who reported Asian and White grew by 87 percent, nearly doubling in size from 868,000 in 2000 to 1.6 million in 2010 [...] the Asian and White population represented the greatest increase in the multiple race Asian population”.⁹ The Asian/White mix is clearly statistically significant, and while my respondents’ experiences are a very small snapshot into this group, they cannot be discounted.

Methodology

17 official semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study. Respondents were obtained from within the student population of a private university. I interviewed 5 Asians, 12 multiracial Asians and had several taped conversations with students of other types of mixed heritage (e.g. black and white), as well as international students from Asia for whom the US racial categories were something new. All except the international students were American citizens, or held dual citizenship with an East Asian country. All except

one of the multiracial Asians were partially East Asian (Korean, Japanese, Chinese); the one was partially South Asian (Indian). Students ranged from sophomores to graduate students, and from ages 18 to 30. All but one of the multiracial Asian respondents were biracial (one was a quarter Asian), and their Asian parent had migrated from Asia.

Most of my mixed-race Asian respondents were contacted through snowballing, as I did not want a sample of respondents who were all politically or socially active. As a result, the response from the multiracial respondents ranged from extremely enthusiastic to fairly disinterested.

“The Little Things” part 1: “What Are You?” Being Read and Racial Categories

“One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race [...] This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorise.” (Omi and Winant 1994: 59)

At the micro level of everyday interaction, race plays a significant role. For my respondents, the level of interaction, and being asked about race, was the platform race manifested itself most frequently. The “what are you?” question is commonly known among multiracial individuals and within the literature, as their appearance is often racially ambiguous. The fact they are asked frequently enough that it becomes an issue to be discussed indicates how pervasive but yet unnoticed race is in US society. Certainly, this is not to say that it always suggests a form of negative categorisation or discrimination. Rather, I suggest in this paper that through the everyday mundane issue of appearance in terms of racial categories, we can see how prevalent, yet taken-for-granted racial categories are. While on the surface the question of “what are you?” may seem innocent and curious – multiracial Asians do not fit into the standard types of appearances that are associated with people of a particular race – I suggest that not only does it demonstrate the rigidity of racial categories in the US, it also highlights how race is continually being performed. It is through the performance of asking of the question that reinforces

society's belief in the existence of races. As Omi and Winant describe, racial formation is a constant process that happens at the level of the everyday as well.

When I asked my respondents if people – strangers, acquaintances or friends – asked them about their race, almost all said that they are often asked the “what are you?” question in a variety of ways. Winnie suggested that “it’s always awkward... they don’t know how to phrase it... ‘Where are your parents from? Why do you look the way you do?’”, while Fiona too has had people asking where she is from, but “I knew what I was asking, she wanted to know like, why do your eyes look like that?” Victoria felt that it was “like a sensitive scar... some people ask about it right away... some people will wait a long time and try to work it into the conversation... people don’t know what to do with you.”

Most of my respondents were asked this question often enough to make a note of it. When Michelle lived in New York, she was often “stopped on the street, and people would follow me, and ask me ‘are you Filipino? Are you Thai? Are you Vietnamese? Are you Cambodian?’”, and almost expected it: “When you meet somebody you’re always like, are they going to ask you, or not? Are they gonna ask me what race I am, is it going to become an issue, are we going to have to talk about it?”

There was also a variety of responses that my respondents had to this question. Winnie, for example, felt it was “funny”: “I do get some amusement out of that. And it’s interesting to see what people think”. Michelle disliked answering this question: “No one’s ever content with like, I’m half-Asian. [laughs] I start making stuff up!... I always try to get this conversation over as quickly as possible... I guess I’m used to it.” David (who was half-Indian) had a changing attitude towards his racial ambiguity:

“People just looking at me think I’m Latino... people would stop me along the street... that was a bit annoying growing up. As I got older, I started to really appreciate, and value my ethnic ambiguity ... it’s like my ethnic ambiguity sort of reflects the increasing ethnic ambiguity of the world!”

David also expressed difficulty at explaining him-

self, especially when he was younger, as he would “say that I’m Indian, people would think you know, Pocahontas or whatever! The wrong kind of Indian! And then to get people to understand that I was neither just Indian, nor just Jewish, but both Indian and Jewish, was quite difficult.”

However, Gareth, Madeline and Robert said that no one had asked them about their race, saying that they were always read as white. Robert did not feel that race was important at all, and was ambivalently glad of how he was read: “I feel like in terms of visually, people always assume I’m white. I imagine it’s probably pretty convenient to look like a white man... I tend to correct them [if they assume I’m white], but it’s not really a problem.”

Multiracial Asians are often miscategorised as neither Asian or white, such as David, and Fiona’s half-Filipino, half-white friend who “doesn’t even look traditionally Asian either, so that was a really weird experience for him being biracial, because he looks like Mexican, or Latino... if you don’t have the black hair, or the slinky eyes, you don’t look Asian.” Winnie was often mistaken for being Hawaiian or Latina: “I was much darker, my skin was darker, and my hair was darker too, actually... people wouldn’t quite know what I was. But they knew I wasn’t white.”

Interestingly, several respondents brought up that it was often Asian Americans who would ask them about their race, rather than white Americans. Victoria felt that “for Asians, who’ve been Asian their whole lives obviously! They can pick out these subtle characteristics, like the shape of my eyes, or the colour of my skin, the colour of my hair”. She also related a story where in college, a Hawaiian classmate of hers of Japanese descent asked “I hope you don’t me asking, but what ARE you?” She used those exact words. And I was like, do you mean, am I like – ethnicity? And she was like, yeah!... And she was like, oh, that’s really cool! And got really excited. As if I were like, sort of part of her club.” Similarly, some also felt that they were extra-aware of other half-Asians, such as Winnie, David, and Hannah who said that “sort of like a half-Japanese-dar, or an Asian-dar... they stand out to me in a crowd more than the average person”.

The phenotypical appearance of the body is

therefore important in racial categorisation in the US. The 5 races are not merely simple categories set down by the government, but are internalised by the people, and race takes on the characteristics of skin colour. Victoria had a story about her half-Asian mother: “her birth certificate, under race, says – I kid you not. They wrote “yellow”, and then scratched it out, and then wrote “Mongolian”, and then scratched it out, and wrote “yellow” again”, while David frequently used “brown”: “I think brown is a fairly useful category [for South Asians]... brown has come up not to mean just a colour, but actually a regional identity, which works fairly well”.

While appearing racially ambiguous can cause a sense of marginalisation from racial groups, this did not happen with most of my respondents. For example, Bradshaw has written that biracial people sometimes “experience disconfirmation or disbelief of the personal data they do reveal” (1992: 83). Some experienced a similar disbelief. Robert, who said he was always read as white, described a situation in 10th grade when “A kid actually approached me, like ‘someone told me you were half Japanese. Like, what?? That can’t be true!’ I said, ‘yeah.’ And he was just like, absolutely stunned!” Only Madeline was particularly concerned about how she was read as white, instead of partly Asian. She had been raised by her Korean grandmother, and felt extremely connected to the culture, but was sometimes frustrated that it was not reflected in her appearance. She has also had people doubt her Asian heritage: “There are cases where people didn’t want to believe me! (laughs) because I guess I don’t look Asian at all!... Sometimes I feel like I want to look more Asian!”

However, all except Madeline felt neutral towards their racially ambiguous appearance. When asked if they would change their appearance, none indicated that they would like to. For most, being asked frequently about their appearance was not annoying, but more simply an everyday interaction that they were used to – a “little thing”.

Because of how frequent the “what are you?” question is, I draw the conclusion that race clearly plays a significant role in my respondents’ lives. While they do not necessarily think actively about race, it is clear

that the society around them places emphasis on being able to categorise them into understandable races. As Valverde writes, “All of my life, I have been confronted with “What are you?” questions. I have found that, although these questions seem innocent enough – just a curious passerby, wanting to place me somewhere, anywhere – they are deliberately chosen to assist in that person’s classification of me” (2001: 131). Races in the US are seen to have specific types of appearances, and when people do not fit into them, it causes confusion. Though this break is almost never negative or discriminatory, at least for most of my respondents, it does reify the rigidity of the different racial groups in the US. While some suggest that the increase in the number of multiracial individuals may soon lead to a breaking down of racial categories, as the US moves towards increasing racial and ethnic ambiguity, the expressions of confusion that my respondents (and many other accounts of multiracial individuals) document suggest that their presence merely serves to remind their audience that they are transgressing boundaries by their existence, rather than challenging them.

“The Little Things” part 2: Growing up

Growing up multiracial, all of my respondents had both Asian and typically “American” influences on their cultural experiences. The most salient factors were language, food, and what some described as “values”, or “mindsets”. Rather than considering these different ways of growing up significant, most of them saw it as not particularly note-worthy, and the phrase “little things” came up several times. Fiona, like many others, felt that cultural differences were “the really little things that I don’t realise”, going on to elaborate:

In high school, the running joke sometimes was proving how Asian you were by how many rice cookers you had? (laughs)... I have never seen someone cook rice without a rice cooker. So I went to my friend’s house in high school, and I was like, what are you doing?... And I watched her put gobs of butter in her rice. Like, what?? I had no idea what she was doing! It’s like, so this is how Americans eat rice!

Victoria, too, felt that the differences were subtle:

I think it was about the little things... it was all very subtle. Like having my friends say that it smelled funny in my house... or the fact that we took our shoes off, when we came in the house... I didn't know it was out of the ordinary to eat seaweed and soy sauce... I knew people ate different, but I thought all families ate differently.

The most common aspect of growing up multicultural was the issue of bilingualism, as their Asian parent (having moved from Asia) was able to speak an Asian language. My respondents had different fluencies in the language of their Asian parent. However, what was common was the "little phrases" that most of them knew - as Fiona described: "Things that mothers say to kids! Like get dressed, or wake up, or brush your teeth!"

Food was also an important factor. Many were comfortable with both "American" food (which they described as hot dogs, pizza, burgers, frozen dinners) and homecooked Asian food that was part of their formative experience; many also mixed different types of food in a meal. While Robert did not feel that race was an important part of his identity or upbringing at all, he did pick out food as something important to him: "When I have a meal, I expect the side to be rice, not bread or something!... Certainly a mixture, you know, one day it could be spaghetti, and you know, the next [something else]!" Food was simply a different part of culture for him, and less connected to his racial identity.

Several respondents had both a Western and what they described as an "American" name. David had an Asian first name and a "Jewish American" middle name, and described in great detail how difficult it was growing up with people mispronouncing his Asian name. Hannah, too, had an Asian and "American" name, but switched names depending on where she was. When she moved from LA to Ohio at 11, she started using her Japanese name: "[Using my Japanese name] was kind of that identity process of reinventing myself". Michelle has an Asian name, and described how "I used to hate it. Because I would always want to get those nametags? That have like, generic names... my name was never there, I was always so mad".

Lastly and perhaps most nebulously, most respondents agreed that there was an Asian "mindset" that they had grown up with. Fiona described her Asian mother as having a "typical" Asian mindset: "My mother was very adamant about schoolwork and getting really good grades, and I remember one summer she made me sit down everyday and memorise multiplication tables. I guess a lot more American families, or white American families would've been like, oh, it's summertime, go play!", while Madeline felt that "mannerisms" were important: "Koreans are really adamant about like, respect for your elders, so even if you have an older brother, or someone who's older than you by one year, you're very respectful." Hannah grew up in Japan and America, and felt she had a Japanese upbringing: "My parents raised me with, if anything, more of a Japanese mindset. I never felt - well, I guess I've never felt totally integrated into either [white or Japanese]... in terms of the expectations? I never understood the concept of some of the staples growing up in America, like an allowance, or being grounded, or playing in the neighbourhood outside. Little things."

Again, though these different aspects of growing up were clearly influenced by being both Asian and white, my respondents described it more in terms of culture than race. Their Asian heritage growing up, for most of them, consisted of a collection of the "little things".

"The Little Things" part 3: College

In terms of identity formation, the age when individuals leave their families and hometowns or even states for college is crucial. Renn sees the place of college as affording young people "particular opportunities to explore racial identity" (2004: 16), as they "begin to see advantages as well as disadvantages of being biracial" (ibid). Many of my respondents also felt that college was an important step in their racial identity, and some felt that their experiences growing up helped shape their intellectual interests, peer networks and social awakenings in college.

Madeline is a science student, but switched to East Asian studies, as she is now "more interested in

learning about East Asian culture.” David is a graduate student studying “classical religions of India and [Western] philosophy of religion”, and felt very firmly that his intellectual interests were heavily shaped by his confusing experiences growing up both Hindu and Jewish. Victoria and Fiona were interested in feminist issues, and felt that the framing of issues by feminists was extremely important to how they perceived being multiracial, as well as their opinions of racial oppression and discrimination. Fiona became politically aware: “Because I’m Asian, I should do these things... what changed for college, it changed for me feeling ashamed of [my shortcomings]? To college being more angry that – why are you assuming that I should be this way, why should I be held accountable to whatever you think that Asians should do?” Victoria had a similar experience:

When I went to college, I sort of prided myself on the fact that I wasn’t all white. Because it gave me a leg up in the understanding with regard to tolerance. Because I had actually experienced something, whereas these people just talked about how oppressed everyone is.

For Fiona, it was also the first time she found Asian friends: “I was able to make Asian friends, like one-on-one, that I’d never really gotten before... and I remember my mother being so excited that I had a Korean friend! And she wanted us to be best friends forever!... almost seeing her, a reflection of myself, just a validation, or like a recognition.” Winnie felt that for the first time, people recognised and “knew enough” to tell that she was biracial.

It is thus clear that during college and graduate years, race becomes more of an issue for these respondents. Because they become more socially aware through classes, as well as meeting a new group of friends and having new peer networks, their opinions on race and their Asian heritage changed. However, this is not necessarily the case for all my respondents. Those who attended professional schools, or were not majoring in arts or the soft sciences, were less interested in issues of race as compared with Fiona or David.

Most had primarily white peer networks with some Asians, and only two respondents had half-

Asian friends. Many indicated that their peer networks shaped how they saw the world. For example, Madeline, who grew up with predominantly Asian friends, felt closely tied to the Asian community, and participated in an Asian student organisation on campus. Fiona had no Asian friends growing up, and was excited to meet other Asians. For the other respondents, most felt that race did not play much of a role in their circle of friends or networks. Yvette had never had any problems fitting in with her mostly white group of friends; while they sometimes call her “the Asian”, she indicated that it was always out of fondness, and usually embraced it. As a result, most felt simply “American”, and did not think race was important.

This is in interesting contrast to all my Asian respondents, who had grown up primarily within Asian neighbourhoods, and had many Asian friends. Nina, an American-born Asian, had grown up in a Chinatown on the East Coast, and felt it was extremely important to find Asian friends in college. Rachel had parents who were extremely involved in the Chinese association where she grew up, and she continued to be heavily involved with Chinese and Asian activities on campus, and had a strong Asian friend network. Again, even though college encouraged some of my respondents to be more aware of race, most still did not see race as particularly important to their identity.

Summing up the “Little things”: Feeling excluded versus feeling different

Espiritu has written on the feelings of exclusion experienced by multiracial Asians: “The “acceptance” of multiracial Asians is also fraught with racial biases. Often, multiracial individuals are expected to prove their allegiances and feelings of connection to the ethnic community in order to be accepted as “real” Asians (Ropp, 1997:6). The expectation that multiracials actively identify with their Asian side is premised on monoracial models of race and community; some Asian groups, for example, will accept multiracial Asians only if they renounce or suppress their non-Asian background” (2001: 31). While many of my

respondents did feel that the Asian community – both in general and on campus – were exclusive groups, only Madeline and Fiona felt that it was negatively exclusive. Madeline felt that her appearance “bothered” her as she didn’t look Asian, while Fiona felt that her inability to speak Korean excluded her.

Most felt that Asian student organisations were fairly insular – for example, Michelle felt that “a lot of the Chinese people clicked together”, Hannah felt that among the Japanese they were concerned about purity, while Winnie felt like she would be an “impostor” if she joined an Asian organisation because she did not speak Japanese fluently, but also that she wasn’t Asian “enough”.

However, most were still fairly unconcerned with the insularity of the Asian communities. Although David was interested in finding multiracial friends, he had never felt it important to be part of the Indian American community: “Those cultures tend to be, I think, somewhat insular... Basically those who just hang out in groups with all their friends, you see them walking around – I’m sort of making terrible generalisations! – see them walking around in packs of brown you know!”

Only Fiona and Victoria brought up being excluded from the white community – but Fiona phrased it in terms of “the little things”. She said she had never been discriminated against, but “it’s like, little spaces like micro-oppression... when people think of racism, they think of lynching, and awful awful things, but there’s this literature of trying to use the term ‘micro-oppression’, like the little daily interactions that just kind of remind that you’re different, or that you’re an other group... people ask me, you celebrate Christmas? You think [Asians] are not Christians, we’re all Buddhists, right?” Victoria, too, realised that she was not white when her white friends said “it smelled funny in my house, or comment on the smell of rice. Or the fact that we took our shoes off, when we came into the house”.

These feelings of marginality exist in two forms. The first are the feelings of negativity and exclusion. These respondents were made uncomfortably aware of their differences from both the white and Asian community, and felt actively excluded and separated,

despite their biological and cultural belonging. Fiona found her situation complex: “I do benefit some certain amount from race privilege, because I’m read as white, or just being part-white... but then at the same time it’s really hard to communicate that – the not fitting in anywhere is really difficult.” Victoria, too felt: “I don’t have a community where I can go to, where I can talk about... the little forms of discrimination, like the little things that make me notice that I’m different... I had no community as a multiracial person”. Hannah described her situation as “when all the white Americans don’t think you’re really an American? They don’t think you’re white, and the Asians don’t think you’re Asian”.

Madeline was interested in seeking out half-Asian organisations, and was excited to discover that a university on the West Coast had one. Fiona looked up to a half-Chinese half-white high school teacher”, and “enjoyed” seeing half-Asian actors on television. David also felt a connection to other mixed people – “there are now slowly communities, support networks, groups, cultural groups that are starting to come up around that identity, around being mixed. And to me, that’s actually very real and helpful, and I do find that supportive”. Following Espiritu’s argument, David also felt that his Jewish and Indian sides were at competition, although he phrased it in terms of over-inclusion, rather than exclusion: “It’s nice to be able to go to both parts of myself, both communities for support, but also both want ownership, exclusive ownership... you’re Jewish, because your mother’s Jewish. And I hate when people tell me that!... you’re asking me to pledge allegiance to this group, and to disavow my connection to the other group... everybody wants ownership.”

These experiences are directly parallel to what Espiritu, among other writers on mixed-race (Houston 1991, Nakashima 1996, Mas 1992, King 1997), describe. Tizard and Phoenix, for example, cite Williams, who “argues that ‘the question *What Are You?* That is so often asked of racially mixed people unveils the racial, social disorientation of the person asking the question as much as it potentially dislocates the person being asked. The racially mixed person may feel doubly *othered* by such constant

interrogation’ (Williams, 1996: 203)” (2002: 51, emphasis in original). However, while these respondents described negative feelings of exclusion, most still felt that it was not a particularly significant part of their lives, and did not feel particularly discriminated against. It was most often described as annoyances, rather than a form of marginalisation that played a huge role in shaping their lives.

The second form is one of neutral differences. The majority of my respondents were not particularly affected by negative marginality. Rather, they felt that their differences were merely just that – differences. When I asked if race played any role in their lives, the responses were generally short repetitive ones of indifference, rather than long and detailed responses about how race did not affect their everyday lives.

Again, my argument is not to suggest that feelings of being just different are not a form of marginalisation. At a more macro scale, it is clear that being “different”, even if it is only through the “little things”, still contributes to the overall marginalisation of Asian heritage, people and culture in wider American society. It is important, though, to be aware that my respondents themselves did not interpret this difference as large structural marginalisation and or sometimes even small forms of inequality.

Race as Problem or Phenomena?

All of my respondents had faced problems fitting themselves into existing racial categories in the US, especially on school forms or in situations where they could only choose one race. While the 2000 and 2010 censuses allowed the option of ticking two or more races, this has not trickled down to all other circumstances. Most of them indicated that they had problems when they were younger ticking boxes. Fiona did standardised tests in elementary school and would be in “anguish”; Madeline explained: “There’d be no other multicultural type choice... there’s no choice for me! I’m like, not in these categories! I’m a combination of these!” In 5th grade, David, who had participated in the 2010 census, and felt positive about the option to tick more than one box: “For people who are opponents of multiculturalism in the US, they see

this as a really silly self-indulgent thing – for me, it was really a moment of great progress, and I felt really gratified to be able to check more than one box on the census... I very proudly do it. And I like to exercise the option to identify myself.”

While it may seem like a “little thing” to others, David felt that simply being able to claim his identity was clearly something important. However, most of the other respondents felt that rather than racial categories creating huge identity problems, it was merely a small hindrance, or a situation where there was complexity. Some respondents were unconcerned with this, admitting that while they had difficulty filling these in, it did not bother them significantly. Even Victoria, who claimed herself to be politically active and wondered how much “Asian” one had to be before ticking the Asian box (she is a quarter Asian), did not feel that this impacted her life greatly.

However, most respondents did have opinions about the words they used to describe themselves. Hannah described herself as a “mix”, Winnie prefers “multiracial” over “biracial” as she feels the latter suggests a mix of black/white, while Robert, being Hispanic on his father’s side, also prefers “multiracial”. Fiona, as one of the most vocal respondents, “hated” the term “half Asian”, as “it felt like I was cut down the middle... in some ways, biracial, I can at least try to put parts into a whole, instead of just split parts that aren’t connected.” Racial categories were simply a small barrier that sometimes had to be grappled with, but did not overflow into their racial identity or everyday lives.

There were certainly a variety of difficulties that my respondents had towards their mixed or Asian heritage. Winnie described feeling like an “impostor” within the Japanese community, and Robert felt that it might be “disingenuous” if he allowed people to continue reading him as white instead of half Asian. Victoria, too, felt sometimes like a “faker, a poser”, but for different reasons, when she did not want to “engage with any racial discussions... I wasn’t ever like, attacked because of my race... I wasn’t sufficiently oppressed.” In her younger years, Michelle actively rebelled against “the whole Japanese culture my mom was trying to teach me, because I just wanted

to be like, white, American. Because they treated you different as a kid, and I definitely felt that as a kid, and I didn't like being different."

Some brought up some positives of being multiracial. Though Michelle had wanted to be white growing up, she felt that being both white and Asian, "I'm completely allowed to have prejudice! Even though it's not true!... if you meet like, white WASPy kids, they're always so touchy on the subject." David described his white cousin as thinking it "cool" and "fine" that he was "brown", and that there was no tension among his family.

Some had conflicting views. Hannah felt that it was sometimes positive to be seen as multiracial, as more Japanese, or as more American. She had lived in both Japan and America before starting college, and felt while she was "treated as different", that her ability to negotiate between different identities could be "useful", and that "sometimes I feel like I want to be different." David, too, has a contradictory relationship with his racial identity: "I am simultaneously both alienated from both communities and don't fit into either. AND, perhaps like double the fun, I can appeal to both, I can go to both, I belong in both!"

Despite these varying responses, most still felt that racial identity was not a primary identity. Robert, for example, felt that race did not matter: "I don't think I identify as Asian-American... I don't think I really care about race. But I do strongly identify as a [New York liberal]... the fact that I am from New York does frequently come up a lot!... I have very strong feelings about what a pizza should be, or a bagel should look like." Michelle explicitly stated: "I've never treated [race] as an issue", while for Victoria, she said: "I can check a box if I want to, but I don't have to. Like if it's going to work to my advantage to call in a diversity card?... Asian is a response I give, and not necessarily an identity that I live with."

Multiracial experiences can therefore be seen through the lens of social problems, as my respondents do not fit into existing racial categories. As Omi and Winant note, these racial categories have seeped into everyday consciousness through the desire to racially categorise people, and the problem of "not fitting in" exists in both official situations as well as

among acquaintances or friends. However, I argue that as social scientists, we can also approach these experiences through the lens of social phenomena, aside from inequality. This is not to say that there is a lack of emphasis in research placed upon the positive community aspects of race – much has certainly been written on the pleasure and *communitas* that is formed around minority (and majority) racial groups. I seek instead to demonstrate that race, while evidently permeating society and creating the underlying foundations of how people are understood and read, also exists in the "little things" of the everyday realm. For some of my respondents, the "little things" do not bother them, and so race is not an issue they think deeply about. For others, the "little things" are what permeates their understanding of themselves, and builds up into much larger problems and issues.

Conclusions

The racial framework in the us

Several of my respondents have travelled back to the Asian country their Asian parent is from, and have experience dealing with both American and Japanese/Korean/Chinese approaches to race. Most significantly, they note that the differences are within culture and appearance, rather than any discussion of race. Hannah, who lived roughly half her life in the US and the other half in Japan, felt that her identities were much more about nationality and culture than they were about race; when she returned to America around 10, she learned about race: "I remember moving back to America made me much more conscious of race, because Americans are conscious of it... I'm a lot more about where I'm from.... I did find, coming here, that people are much more preoccupied with race, whereas I'm much more used to thinking of things in terms of like – Japanese versus American, as a cultural or national thing." Additionally, in Japan, there is the existence of the term "haafu", used to describe a half-Japanese, half-white person, though Hannah suggested it was less about "race", and more to do with different origins and appearance. Again, she emphasised that race did not matter to her: "I feel like I'm forced to think about [being Japanese and

American/white] in terms of race [in America], because that's what most people ask about. But not something that's important to me, personally.”

Similarly, my interviews with Asian international students demonstrated their confusion about what “race” constituted. An Indian student said that she was described as a “person of colour”, and did not know what it meant; “race” was not used in India and was something she had to get used to. Similarly, a Pakistani respondent said she did not know how to fill in the race portion of an official form when applying for a social security number.

Madeline, Michelle and Hannah all felt that appearance was important in blending in in Korea and Japan. They felt that they stood out most in these Asian countries because of their looks. However, they also indicated that there was no discussion of *race* in these countries – the discussion was almost always about nationality, appearance and origins, rather than an American understanding of “race”.

It is also important to distinguish between being read, and passing. Much discussion of mixed race often discusses “passing”, where an individual appears to capitalise on his or her racially ambiguous or white-appearing countenance to gain advantages in social or political situations. Schlossberg has written that “[f]or racially marked subjects, passing can mean the difference between life and death, community and isolation, status as property and status as subjects” (2001: 4). However, as Bergman (2009) discusses with relation to gender, “passing” suggests an active desire to be read as something, while “being read” is passive, where the audience is the one who interprets the body.

I suggest that within the US, race is extremely tied to appearance, self-identification, and racial categorisation by others. Appearance is clearly crucial when discussing race; as Alexander and Knowles write, bodies “are the physical matter through which race is signaled (as in Du Bois’ blood and skin notions of race), the material base on which power is inscribed, and the substance through which individuals can lay claim to their own sense of embodied identity and resistance (2005: 2), and Hill points out that “[t]he basis of race studies is, after all, a matter of skin” (1997: 3). The OMB itself highlights the origin of the body, describ-

ing an Asian as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent”, for example, and Omi and Winant describe race as referring to “different types of human bodies” (1994: 55). The NAACP proudly continues to represent “coloured people”. Instead of talking about a “race-blind” society, much popular media and even political rhetoric discusses a “colour-blind” one instead. As Pulera writes, “The five ethno-racial groups that make up the pentagon are roughly equivalent to “races”: whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and American Indians. These dovetail with the attendant colloquial categories – white, black, brown, yellow, and red” (2002: 27). Especially for mixed race individuals, their appearance is ambiguous enough to raise questions, as evidenced by the frequent “what are you?” question. Williams has written that the “the phenotypical ambiguity and cultural fluidity of many multiracial persons have often left folks at a loss in relation to their customary practices of racial pigeonholding. As a result, Asian-descent multiracial individuals have chapters and chapters worth of “what are you?” stories they can share” (2004: 166).

What does this mean for “white” and “asian” as racial categories?

If the racial system of the US is so dependent upon appearance, what does this mean for “white”? As Doane notes, whiteness is “treated as a default category” (2003:4) - unmarked, unblemished and unnoticed. None of my respondents felt the need to clarify their non-Asian side when asked “what are you?” When I asked my respondents if they felt the need to clarify that they were half white, Fiona suggested that when she describes herself as “half Asian, the assumption is that the other half is white, so it’s not articulated... the language implies there’s white, and then it’s kind of sullied a little bit, by the Asian”. Mengel has also noted how whiteness is not “coloured”, stating that “[b]ecause Whiteness is a racial construction based on notions of unalloyed purity, by definition, mixed race people cannot be White.” (2001: 101). Many respondents commonly exchanged the words “white” and “American”, when describing their

upbringing. For example, they would talk about “American” food like hamburgers and pizza, or describe feeling more “American” than Asian; this again indicates that white is the default in America.

As a result, being “white” is almost equivalent to having no race. Schlossberg writes that “[w]hite individuals, for instance, are in a constant state of passing as having no ethnic or racial identity at all, as having “nothing to say” about race, or as somehow existing outside the volatile world of “racial tensions” (2001: 5). Feagin, writing on McKinney’s work on whiteness, states that “in the United States whiteness is so central a social reality, so “normal,” that most whites of all ages rarely examine the reality of their white identities and privileges. For most whites, including scholars and commentators, even the term ‘American’ seems to conjure up the image of a white person.” (2005: xii), while McKinney’s respondents (2005) describe their white identity as “boring”, and not an issue.

While this can be interpreted as the hegemony of whiteness, where they simply have no race, I suggest that the racelessness of whiteness can be interpreted in an inclusive way – that my Asian/white respondents are also seen as white. While a few such as Winnie and Fiona suggest that they are generally seen as Asian (and Winnie was clear to say that she “thought” she was, rather than how she actually was read), most said that they identified also as white, and had no problems fitting in to a white peer network as if they were one of them. I argue that “white” is becoming broader – just as whiteness grew from people with Anglo-Saxon heritage to include Southern Europeans, Irish and Jews, I suggest that Asian/white individuals can be seen to be treated as another ethnicity under “white”, although of a very different sort. Not only were some of my respondents’ upbringing American (and therefore “white”), but their phenotypical characteristics made them appear white enough to be read as white.¹⁰

While Renn suggests that “multiracial people have historically been declared people of colour (and not white), theory predicts that they follow the same stages as their monoracial peers of colour” (2003: 13), only Madeline identified strongly as Asian, with the other respondents either identifying as white,

mixed/multiracial, or with no race at all. I argue that while Renn’s statement took into consideration a wide variety of multiracial individuals, the specific case of white/East Asian mixed individuals creates a different situation. While my respondents indicated that there were “little things” that made them different from their other, primarily white peers, none felt that there was any exclusion from being white (upon my questioning) – they were accepted as white, but a different kind of white. On the other hand, many more responded to my question about exclusion from Asian groups, discussing the insularity of these. I suggest that what constitutes whiteness is expanding, and can seemingly include East Asian/white multiracial individuals. As Frankenberg has written, “[w]hiteness changes over time and space and is no way a transhistorical essence” (1993, cited in Nakayama and Krizek 1999: 103).

Again, this argument lies on the vagueness of what constitutes whiteness. As Drzewiecka and Wong write, “For some white Americans, whiteness is often seen as “empty” in comparison to the recognized cultural formations of nonwhite Americans, specifically when “culture” becomes connected with the artifactual products and practices of “nonwhite” others. Because of these transparencies and erasures it is very difficult to map out, describe, and theorise about whiteness as a cultural formation” (1999: 198/199). Because whiteness is defined as the absence of colour, or a recognisable culture, it is therefore used often exchangeably with simply “American” culture. For my respondents, who are American, white, AND East Asian, they can be included within “whiteness” because of phenotypical characteristics, but also because the Asian culture they are familiar or identify with is not as strong as it was for my Asian-American respondents, for example. They appear sufficiently white, and they act and behave “American”, or “white”.

Doane has written that despite different types of current whiteness (or what is called ‘ethnicity’ in contemporary US), whiteness has merged, as “whites are less likely to feel social and culturally “different” in their everyday experiences and much less likely to have experienced significant prejudice, discrimination, or disadvantage as a result of their race [...] this

socially constructed centering is magnified by the decline in ethnic affiliations and ethnic differences among whites, a process that has reduce group identities to “symbolic” individual affiliations or mere “descent categories” (2003: 7). Similarly, being a multiracial East Asian/white individual has become a “symbolic” affiliation. Crucially, Doane also notes that “[t]he central component of the sociology of whiteness is the observation that white Americans have a lower degree of self-awareness about race and their own racial identity than members of other racial-ethnic groups [...] it does not generally intrude upon the everyday experiences of most whites” (Doane 2003: 6/7); McKinney, too states that “[w]hite adolescents, not constantly reminded of their race, construct a self-identity based on other statuses.” (2005: 136). While my respondents can discuss their racial identity, some in much more detail than others, and some with a passion or political/social awareness, for the rest of my respondents, it simply is not brought up enough to form the primary aspect of their identity. Being Asian/white is experienced perhaps more as an ethnicity (in American terms), rather than a race.

I argue also that this currently works only for the specific Asian/white mix, and even then more specifically the East Asian/white mix. East Asians are perhaps closest in terms of socio-economic status to the “highest” race (white), can often be read as white, and can thus be accepted as “honorary whites”, despite their “perpetual foreigner” stereotype (Wu 2002). This is certainly untrue for black/white mixes, where hypodescent continues to rule – Lily, a biracial black/white respondent pointed out that in high school, although her classmates had seen both her black and white parents, they still saw her, the individual, as black. What made her different from her white peers was not a “little thing”, but a structurally and socially significant difference that reduced her to black.

This leads back to Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation, a constant process, reified through projects, and that can be changed. I argue that the case study of my respondents’ experience demonstrates the processual and changing nature of racial formation. The Asian/white mix is an interesting way

of approaching what the US means when it uses the concept “race” – not just at the administrative and policy-making level, but how people on the ground understand race. While Southern/Central Europeans are now white – arguably because of their appearance, as well as their geographical proximity to Western Europe – how can we explain Asians? As Doane writes, since race is “based upon the arbitrary (and imprecise) evaluation of physical characteristics” (2003: 9), this impreciseness means that many white/Asians can simply seen as raceless, and therefore white.

Race and the everyday

Race and racial identities, though existing on the level of the individual, are clearly a result of the individual’s interaction with society. As Clarke and Gerner write regarding racial identity, “[t]he idea of community has always been central to the construction of group and individual identity [...] As most of us are essentially sociable people, much, although not all, of this identity construction takes place against the background of the communities that people live in” (2010: 153). When a group of individuals have no community to fall back on – unlike, for example, established minority races who have access to support organisations or connections through family – it is near impossible to contact a political or social organisation to examine identity. Nakayama and Krizek note that the “everyday-ness of whiteness makes it a difficult territory to map” (1999:94). Furthermore, racial identity is not always based upon being politically aware or active – one can identify as white, or multiracial, or black, without feeling oneself tied to history or larger social structures. Additionally, for my multiracial respondents, it is the *lack* of identity that creates their racial experience. They are not part of any racial group, and some feel part of both, part of neither, or a blend of feeling both accepted and rejected. Many of my respondents are acutely aware of how they are read, and perceived by their audiences, at least in terms of race, simply because they are questioned about it often enough.

Therefore, as a methodology, studying the everyday aspects of race and racial identity, as well as how individuals *understand* race in their own lives, is

crucial, especially when studying a group such as multiracial Asian/white people. Identity is everything, but yet nothing at the same time. In 1999, Shome suggested that “scholars have now begun shifting their attention to *everyday* (as opposed to overt racist) representations and enactments of whiteness: the underlying argument in this shift being that whiteness dominates every other racial configuration in Western society” (107); this has been applied to whiteness studies, but far less to studies of minority races, and mixed-race studies. Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation includes both macro and micro levels, and I suggest that the latter should not be lost in social science’s desire to focus on race as based on social problems and inequality, without including it as a social phenomenon.

Is the us in a post-racial society?

Much literature on multiracial Americans has discussed the fragmented nature of their identities, as well as the discrimination and problems faced by the confusion in terms of categorisation. Mengel has written that “[m]ixed race people of all backgrounds and histories have tended to have similar characteristics attributed to them. The most common designation imposed on mixed race people of all ancestries is the inference that they are fragmented beings” (2001: 100). However, as demonstrated by my respondents, the “fragmented” state of existence, or negative experiences of marginalities, do not necessarily apply to them. David felt that the US was an excellent place to currently be a multiracial individual:

I was born and raised in the US, right. A certain part of America – that’s my primary identity, I’m American... I really am [American], even if I have been marginalised... [now] is a sort of crowning moment, so to speak, with Obama’s election, and like suddenly, all of a sudden, everybody understood what a mixed-race person was! ... I do think that the US is one of the best places to be a mixed-race person, being a nation of immigrants, and an open society, and where everyone is coming and mixing, a lot of mixing going on.

Rather than being pulled apart, marginalised or “confused”, all my respondents treat their experiences of race as mundane and everyday, and stressed that it

was the “little things”. Indeed, it was my Asian American respondents who generally felt much more attached to categories and discussions of race. However, this interpretation of race by my multiracial Asian respondents was generally not because they felt they had deconstructed race by their multiracial existence, and that since the racial categories made no sense, they did not think them relevant. Instead, it was more that race simply faded a little more into the background, and became less relevant than other aspects of their identity. Race was not a master status for most of them. I suggest that with multiracial identities and experiences becoming more common, there is no need to assimilate or fit in – they can simply exist. While Hall and Turner have written that “[m]ixed-race individuals have felt the pressure to “choose sides” throughout their lives” (2001:82), I have found that none of my respondents, except David, have felt this same pressure.

Renn suggests 5 models of multiracial identity for college students: monoracial Identity (“I’m black”), multiple monoracial identities (“I’m asian and latina”), multiracial identity (“I’m mixed”), extraracial identity (“I don’t check any boxes”), and situational identity (“It depends”). 10 years after her study was published, and based upon my respondents’ experiences, I suggest a new one: non-racial identity – “I don’t really care”. While some of my respondents certainly fit into some of her, the majority of my respondents didn’t see race a big part of their lives. Importantly, it is not that *race* does not matter – my respondents are certainly aware of their racial position, and all indicate that the monoracial categories are problematic. Instead, for them, within their own everyday lives and their individual identities, race is not a master status, or a primary identity.

However, despite the fact that there was no discussion of explicit discrimination, the “little things” continue to demonstrate how basic race and racial categories are in the US. Though my respondents said that they never faced any overt racism, there continues to be a sense of exclusion and marginalisation – not in a discriminatory or even always negative way, but through the “little things” that remind them frequently that they look different, and that they are

different. By being constantly confronted with how *different* they are in US society, race clearly continues to play a major role in everyday life.

Notes

¹ Parker and Song note that while in the UK "the inclusion of a 'mixed' category in the 2001 census question on ethnic origin has thus far gone largely uncontested" (2001: 15), the US "debates over the possible inclusion of a 'multiracial' or 'mixed race' category for the 2000 census were heated and vehement" (ibid), tackling questions of representation and visibility as minority race groups were worried that their numbers would go down.

² <http://censtats.census.gov/data/US/01000.pdf>

³ http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=DEC_10_NSRD_P1&prodType=table

⁴ www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br02.pdf

⁵ The phrase "little things" is one that many of my respondents brought up themselves.

⁶ As Omi points out, although Tiger Woods calls himself a "Cablinasian", "an amalgamation of Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian" (2001: ix), he is considered black in the US.

⁷ Additionally, what "race" refers to depends on societies/communities – an Indian/Chinese person might be seen simply as "Asian" within the US racial categorisation system, but would be seen as different races in Asia; an Indian respondent from India was confused about what "race" actually referred to as it is not used commonly in India.

⁸ <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>

¹⁰ Again, rather than calling it "passing", which suggests activeness on their part, I suggest that it is simply "being read" – my respondents do not try to pass as white.

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