

Introduction



Emilie Hammerstein has a problem. Her dad is German, her mother is Chinese, and she constantly gets the same question from total strangers: “What are you?”

Emilie generally responds in a polite manner, but once the intruders leave she questions herself as forcefully as the daily gauntlet of strangers. “I have often felt that the world is not ready for someone like me, someone who is a walking contradiction to their cultural definitions. They don’t understand that it can be confusing for me to be constantly asked, ‘What are you?’”¹

Emilie’s question—America’s question—is one significant indication of an unprecedented challenge to U.S. culture. Millions of other American combinations share Emilie’s sense of being a walking contradiction to the white/black dichotomy. In everyday life, U.S. culture still calls these (mostly younger) men and women “mixed-race” Americans. Many stoically endure that label, but others defiantly reject it and its everyday associates, negative markers like “half”; “exotic”; “tragic mulatto”; or, perhaps worst of all, “half-breed.”

One term they do embrace is *fusion*, an idea I first became aware of at the 2004 National Student Conference on the Mixed Race Experience. Fusions argue that all human beings are ethnic combinations.

They believe that there is one race, the human race, and that the human race is, by definition, a ceaseless series of human unions. Fusions also deliberately refuse to use skin color as an important way to identify anyone on earth. They believe that, instead of being self-segregating barriers to interaction, somatic differences are delightful and diverse manifestations of the underlying and indissoluble unity of six billion people.

From the fusion’s perspective, assimilation is a form of masochism: why embrace a society that lacks positive words to describe them? As “walking contradictions,” these Americans try to reconfigure the culture. They want to instigate a mutiny. When the rest of us ask them, “What are you?” they respond with questions of their own. What kind of culture cuts people into mixtures and halves? Since even the smallest group of people manifests meaningful genetic differences, what is the basis for the idea of racial purity? How can anyone have the audacity to talk about me as a “mixture,” when the idea of racial purity is as valid as the beliefs of the Flat Earth Society?

These questions will not disappear. On the contrary, the often contentious debates about the “racial” identities of figures like Senator Barack Obama and Tiger Woods suggest that the future promises more discussion than ever. Here are the Census Bureau’s estimates for the next fifty years. As the Census Bureau indicates, “All other races” are growing at a rapid pace because, among other things, close to 60 percent of Asian Americans under the age of 25 marry outside of their ethnicity.² Emilie Hammerstein represents an integral part of America’s future, and, in her need to find positive words to describe herself, Emilie and her cohort pose questions that may fundamentally reconfigure American culture. Put differently, Emile and her cohort hope to emancipate everyone from slavery’s most lasting ideological legacy, the white/black dichotomy that, 140 years after the end of the Civil War, still defines Americans by what poisonously divides Americans.

All Other Races in 2000	7.1 million and 2.5 percent of our people
All Other Races in 2020	11.8 million and 3.5 percent of our people
All Other Races in 2050	22.4 million and 5.3 percent of our people

Emilie has company, lots of it. Like an obsolete computer running new software, American society crashes when confronted with the more than fifty million citizens who are incompatible with our operating system of racial beliefs. Latinos, Asians, West Indians, Arabs, Pakistanis, and Indians are neither black nor white; they can never fully embrace the culture, and it never fully embraces them because the nation's dictionary of racial definitions—what the sociologist Erving Goffman called our “grammar of conduct”—offers no accepted, much less positive, way to describe them. For example, many immigrants from Pakistan have darker skins than African Americans, but we never call them black. So, what are they? “None of the above” receives the check mark, because, from their perspective—one that they share with bronze-skinned Latinos, Indians, and Arabs—the operating system is a mystery, and so are they if they try to think in white and black.

Consider three provocative paradoxes posed by many of America's most recent immigrants.

- According to the Census Bureau, white people attacked America on September 11, 2001. That may sound absurd unless we remember that the U.S. Census Bureau defines “white as referring to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa.” From one perspective, this represents a reverse “one drop rule”; instead of one drop of black blood making you black, one drop of white blood makes you white, even if your skin is as dark as that of former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. The Census Bureau helps makes our cultural rules, so, if we use it as a guide, the Arabs who executed the hideous attack on the World Trade Center were white men. The idea of “white Arabs” forces us to ask questions like these: are the census categories rational, much less valid? Or, are they, as some Arab Americans argue, “a peculiar fixation” of a culture so addicted to thinking in two colors that it must squeeze brown people into white boxes?³
- The United States is home to more than one million West Indian Americans, the majority from the Caribbean nation of Jamaica.

Jamaicans in Kingston or Ocho Rios certainly see the dark color of their skin but rarely dwell on it. Instead, Jamaicans use their nation and culture as all-important axes of social and personal self-esteem.

Jamaican pride is a delight to see but becomes a problem the moment a Jamaican lands in New York. Now they are black; of course, they already knew that. But until they arrived in the United States, no one told them that they were *only* black. The realization is often so jolting and uncomfortable that Jamaicans (and Trinidadians) resist assimilation. Instead, they ridicule American attitudes toward color by asking two sometimes very angry questions. How can dark-skinned people who use culture as an axis of identity assimilate into a society that only wants to define them by the color of their skin? And, why should they fit into American categories? If Jamaicans make skin color a secondary or peripheral consideration in judging themselves and others, maybe Americans should use Jamaicans as role models rather than vice versa?

- A final example comes from a question posed by one of my colleagues who had attended the 2004 Unity Conference of seven thousand “minority” journalists in Washington, D.C. Mexican, Puerto Rican, Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Iranian professionals all agreed they were neither black nor white. Each group stood outside the dichotomy, but all still referred to themselves as “people of color.” Stimulated by the immigrants’ choice, my colleague wanted to know how Americans could ever create a color-blind society if immigrants were taught to use color as the primary basis for self-identification. Even more important, the immigrants’ choice led my colleague to these perplexing conclusions: If Asians, Latinos, and Arabs were people of color, then white people had no color even though they and everyone else called them white. In essence, white was not a color, but *people of color only existed in relation to white people*, who did not get a color because they were white, which is not a color.

In this book, none-of-the-above immigrants are a blessing, never in disguise. In trying to comprehend or fit into the white/black dichotomy, Asians, Latinos, West Indians, Arabs, and (India) Indians

ask us to rethink what the sociologists Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd called America's "of course" assumptions. Many immigrants suggest that our operating system of racial beliefs is weird or even a form of cultural insanity; and many of them are as eager for a full-scale mutiny as are Emilie and millions of other mixed-race Americans.

For the first time in U.S history, the white/black dichotomy faces a challenge, not from a small and insignificant minority but from the fastest-growing and arguably most vocal segment of the increasingly diverse American people. Consider the broad demographic outlines of America's future from the 2000 census.

Latinos in 2000	35.6 million and 12.6 percent of our people
Latinos in 2020	59.7 million and 17.8 percent of our people
Latinos in 2050	102.5 million and 24.4 percent of our people
Asians in 2000	10.6 million and 3.8 percent of our people
Asians in 2020	17.9 million and 5.4 percent of our people
Asians in 2050	33.4 million and 8 percent of our people
Blacks in 2000	35.8 million and 12.7 percent of our people
Blacks in 2020	45.3 million and 13.5 percent of our people
Blacks in 2050	61.3 million and 14.6 percent of our people
Whites in 2000	195.7 million and 65 percent of our people
Whites in 2020	205 million and 61.3 percent of our people
Whites in 2050	210 million and 50.1 percent of our people
All Other Races in 2000	7.1 million and 2.5 percent of our people
All Other Races in 2020	11.8 million and 3.5 percent of our people
All Other Races in 2050	22.4 million and 5.3 percent of our people

More than fifty million Americans and their children cannot or will not assimilate into American culture. In cities like Detroit (Arab Americans); San Diego (Mexican Americans); Edison, New Jersey (Indians); Seattle (mixed-race Americans); and Hartford (Puerto Ricans and Jamaicans), millions of new Americans busily engage in a

series of parallel monologues. Working within their own ethnic groups, newcomers encounter what Harvard's Samuel Huntington calls "Anglo-Protestant culture," and, in the process of trying to comprehend how Americans think, Chicanos or West Indians regularly engage in tightly bounded acts of defiance. Each group provides more or less mutinous answers for its own members, but none seeks to provide a new cultural consensus for the nation as a whole.

This book argues that a new consensus can emerge if we consider what these parallel monologues tell us about U.S. culture as it is seen by none-of-the-above immigrants and fusions. Since a cultural mutiny is already under way, Americans have only two choices: understand why none-of-the-above Americans think as they do or stumble into a future that continues to define Americans by what divides them rather than by what unites them.

Some Americans will understandably question the need for a mutiny. Many of my students, for example, claim that they do not think in terms of race and ethnicity. They judge people by their character, not by the set of prejudices that guided their parents and grandparents. "Get over it," say many younger Americans. Why do we need to listen to multiculturalism lectures that only echo what we already think?

There has been substantial change over the last forty or fifty years. Many Americans are much more comfortable with difference than our predecessors were. But, to those who argue that a mutiny is unnecessary, I would ask these questions. If radical change is not required, why do the children of mixed-race marriages encounter some of the ugliest "racial" prejudice that America has to offer? Emilie Hammerstein's parents, a German man and a Chinese woman, married because they happily transcend the bigoted past; yet Emilie, as the child of color-blind Americans, every day faces the terrible discrimination and pain that occur because "halves" do not fit into a culture still dominated by race and the white/black dichotomy.

Put differently, if everything is OK, why was it necessary for Donna Jackson Nakazawa to publish (in 2003) a book titled *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me? A Parents Guide to Raising Multiracial Children*. This book helps parents protect their mixed-race children from the rest of us!

Let me repeat: substantial change has occurred, and the youngsters who argue that they no longer harbor prejudices are genuine. No one is lying. But the “get over it” attitude leads people to assume that, because they have changed, Americans have somehow leapfrogged over five hundred years of history without discarding some of its most basic and crucial forms of self-identification.

Here is my request. To those who argue that a radical reconfiguration is unnecessary, suspend judgment until we first analyze the debates taking place throughout the United States. Latinos, Arabs, and Asians, among others, argue that racial thinking is still a very vital part of everyday American life. Whatever we may think is happening, new immigrants still encounter a world aptly described by Senator Richard Durbin in congressional debates that occurred on March 27, 2006: “America has two great traditions. We are a nation of immigrants and we are a nation intolerant of immigrants.”

In the chapters that follow, *America Beyond Black and White* listens carefully to the series of parallel monologues now occurring in the dis-united states of America. The book also examines the history of various groups. This historical analysis serves three purposes: It helps explain the diverse and often negative reactions of these groups to American racial thinking; it underlines the continuing power of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. history to still set the parameters of American beliefs about race, ethnicity, and the place of non-European immigrants in American life; and, finally, it helps “right” American history.

The history of none-of-the-above immigrants argues that, first, the melting pot is a myth and that, second, it is a myth that acts as a towering barrier to any future sense of national unity. In the past, groups like Arabs, Indians, Mexicans, and Asians learned that American culture never included their ethnic ingredients. Today, still faced with the rejection and confusion rooted in American history, millions of none-of-the-above immigrants deliberately isolate themselves from a society that treats them no better than it does Emilie Hammerstein and her seven million fellow fusions.

In essence, the immigrants, their (increasingly fused) children, and their experiences in the United States offer us an unprecedented

chance to, all together, provide a radically imaginative answer to a question first posed by Randolph Bourne in 1916, “What shall we do with our America?”

That is the monumental question posed by none-of-the-above immigrants and mixed-race Americans. Should we abolish America’s operating system of racial beliefs? Should we exchange the challenged metaphor of the melting pot for another ideal? And, if so, where do we all go from here? How, rooted in a more complete picture of U.S. immigrant history, can we create a world where Americans define one another by what unites them—their shared humanity— rather than by what divides them: the color of their skin and a descending scale of superior and inferior races?

We have meaningful cause for optimism, especially if we begin by accurately grasping how and why the United States of America fundamentally transformed its immigration laws in 1965.