

*Seven*

## The Question Marks



*Mixed-Race Americans*

### The Claremont Colleges Host the Eighth Annual Conference on the Mixed Race Experience

*They call them* noisy minutes. To relieve stress after a pressure-packed week of schoolwork, students at California's Harvey Mudd College (one of Claremont's eight subdivisions) gather among the cinder-block residential halls on Friday nights and, using their dorm courtyards as a barbecue pit, torch anything they can find. Dictionaries, wooden palettes, an oven, a shopping cart, a scarecrow: these kids even burned a fountain.

Mudd students like flames. One fellow repeatedly ignites his hands with Ronson lighter fluid for Zippos; another boasts that he can light a whole book of cardboard matches and put them out in his mouth. Still others stockpile as many as twenty containers of 99 percent isopropyl alcohol.

The flames often rise above the buildings. Naturally, university officials know about the noisy minutes. However, as dean of residential life Guy Gerbick stresses, "fires on the campus are encouraged for their warmth and social nature, not for any destructive purposes . . . we

explicitly prohibit students from burning large objects and those that do not fit within a barbeque.”<sup>1</sup>

In February 2004, four Mudd College students in search of spring break fun decided to steal a huge piece of art from a campus building. They dragged the piece—a ten-foot cross—to their common area and lit it up. The entire campus soon reeked of burning wood. As one of the perpetrators explained to the school newspaper, the *Student Life*, “When we stood it in the dorm courtyard, the towering ten-foot art piece screamed to us for a Mudderesque noisy minutes style touch. It was granted. We lit it, watched it burn, and marveled at the flames. When it was over, we went to sleep. At no point during this act did we stop to consider the political and social implications of burning a cross. At no point did we stop to think of a possible explanation for why the cross was there or to whom it belonged. This is the only possible explanation I have to offer you: boredom, stupidity, and lack of common sense.”

Just a few weeks later, on March 9, 2004, vandals attacked a car owned by Kerri Dunn, a visiting professor of psychology. Three of her tires were slashed with a razor; her windshield was smashed, and the entire vehicle was spray painted with anti-Semitic and anti-African American slurs over her car.<sup>2</sup>

Claremont president David Oxtoby declared March 10 a day of reflection. Classes were canceled, teach-ins ran throughout the day, and that evening more than two thousand chanting students assembled. “Hey, hey. Ho, ho. Ignorance has got to go.” Jewish students told the crowd, “we are here to say that we are scared. Swastikas and broken glass trigger potent memories for Jews.” Professor Dunn, making her first public appearance since the attack, spoke to the crowd: “I can’t tell you how it makes me feel to look out into the sea of you and know that you are here to support me and the larger issue of civil rights and equality.” Students erupted with such passion that it took “two minutes for the crowd’s explosive applause to die down.”

But Dunn was about to go from campus hero to campus villain. The day after the rally, students told police that they had seen Professor Dunn defacing her own car. By April 1, the beginning of an inter-collegiate mixed-race conference, Dunn found herself suspended

with pay. Meanwhile, the FBI claimed to be following a trail that could lead to charges of a hate crime against the professor; and the campus tried to recover from two terrible incidents, one of utter stupidity, the other an apparently “well intentioned” effort to make students aware of Claremont’s allegedly poisonous racial climate.

The mixed-race conference was a gathering of students from all over the United States. They occasionally met to strategize about the dilemmas of being multiracial in a society that demanded that they choose one and only one box. In a beautiful location, students hoped to share experiences and lines of attack. None expected that the host campus would be reeling from an incident that dramatized the problems of mixed-race Americans.

Walking through the dorms on the first day of the conference, I saw many windows still plastered with homemade signs: “I will not tolerate hate” and “Ponoma College [another Claremont subdivision] has no room for hate.” Will Talbott (’05) told the *Campus Collage*, “no one wants to suggest that the solidarity expressed at the various rallies and teach-ins was misguided, but if the allegations turn out to be true, one has to recognize that as a campus we were deceived. And I think that deception generates a lot of frustration, and it’s tough to know where to direct that frustration.”

Offering a ready answer to Talbott, a student organization named SCRAP (Students Challenging Racism and White Privilege) wanted Claremont to erase the economic and social advantages that nurtured and sustained Claremont—and a legion of other ivy-covered universities. Michael Owen (’05) noted, “we are reviving SCRAP to address the need—particularly among students who are white or who benefit from white privilege—for self-education about racism, privilege and related systems of oppression.”<sup>3</sup>

The mixed race conference also spotlighted white privilege. On a campus full of the incredible promises and depressing realities of U.S. life, two hundred American students expressed a level of frustration with white America that often exceeded the angst displayed by Claremont’s battered and bewildered students.

The conference organizers included the following student activists, all of whom prominently cited their family backgrounds: Janiva

Cifuentes-Hiss, a “Colomgringa”; Michelle Vijerberg, “DutChinese”; Jun Stinson, “Japanese, German, and Scotch-Irish”; Alex Auerback, “Filipino and Caucasian”; Lakshmi Eassey, Indian/Russian/Polish/Italian/French; Mariko Ferronato, “Hapa-haole”; and Vivian Ohtake-Urizar, “Jamalan (Japanese and Guatemalan).”

This diverse group hoped to represent the nearly seven million Americans of mixed racial origins. Their common cause was an unprecedented change in the 2000 census that allowed respondents to make one or more choices when describing their racial origins. These young activists sought to jump-start a radical redefinition of race and ethnicity in the United States. Their dream was that a revolution in racial thinking would forever eliminate the kind of ugliness experienced at Claremont and around the United States.

Conference organizer Matt Kelley spoke of the many mixed-race people “who recall actually thinking they *were* aliens—they thought they *had* to be. It is as if the world is moving on apparently oblivious to this dilemma that’s earth shattering for you—the person in the middle of it. *Do I exist or do I not exist?*”<sup>4</sup>

In a room sporting a sign reading “In the event of an earthquake, don’t panic!” organizers calmly told campus activists about a nationwide plan to force universities to comply with the wishes of mixed-race Americans. They wanted all universities to include a multiracial category on their admissions and other administrative forms. In the event that the universities refused, students were told to assert their civil rights. By all means, learn what they think of you; but never forget to define yourself as you see fit, that is, as a Jamalan, a Colomgringa, a Blackanese, a double, or a mixed-race American.

Keynote speaker Ramona Douglass, of the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), devoted her address to the question “What does it take to produce extraordinary results in the face of no agreement where matters of race/multirace are concerned?” Douglass is the intelligent, vibrant “grandmother” of the mixed-race conference. After founding AMEA in the 1980s, she lobbied Congress and the Census Bureau relentlessly in the 1990s to include a multiracial category in the 2000 tabulations. Douglass fully understands the need for inclusion and compliance with administrative procedures. But, as the

young people acquire legitimacy and visibility, she hopes that their pleas for recognition produce a paradigm shift, a cultural revolution that uses the question “What are you?” to undermine five hundred years of U.S. history.

In 1997 Douglass testified before the House Subcommittee on Government Management and Technology, arguing that the concept of race is “real only in our speaking of it—not in science—and through our communications with one another we have the ability to transform the listening mentality and spirit of a nation.” She wanted people to recognize that “the one drop rule is an irrational notion born out of greed, exploitation and repression.”<sup>5</sup>

At the Claremont conference, Douglass told her audience that seven million mixed-race people share an awesome responsibility. As walking question marks, they had the power to help three hundred million Americans understand the pain and prejudice experienced by the multiracial community. However, along the way, they should never be selfish. “In the pursuit of justice for one community, *we must take a stand for securing justice for all communities*. Without that commitment and generosity of spirit we will remain slaves to our collective fears, doubts, racial misconceptions and what’s expedient.”

As the conference came to a close, the mixed-race students focused on developing a four-year strategy to force universities to recognize their existence and comply with demands for a multiracial box on admissions and other administrative forms. A few veterans of the movement suggested that such efforts would encourage not radical social change but traditional racial thinking; after all, if race was real only in our speaking of it, then using the word *race* only reinforced the existing cultural ugliness. The students politely listened to these warnings, but it was clear that they intended to devote their energies and scarce resources to winning inclusion in America’s traditional racial mix.

They may succeed. Or, rather than wedge themselves in between white and black, the mixed-race students may ultimately decide that, however hard the task, they need to explode current categories rather than reform them.

The debate is on, in a society whose best universities experience

rigid racial divisions, everyday tensions, cross burnings by the ignorant, and faculty who stage hate incidents to help us love one another. If Claremont is a microcosm, America is what it represents.

### A Matter of Life and Death

*Bothered by some* skin lesions on her face, Cathy Tashiro went to a dermatologist. The doctor gently assured her that “Asian women don’t get skin cancer.” When Cathy explained that her Irish mother had extremely fair skin, the doctor repeated himself: “Asian women don’t get skin cancer.” Cathy tried to leave the doctor’s office as soon as she could, but his reaction is normal for many physicians. Like the rest of us, doctors learn to think in pure categories, so Cathy is Asian, and the truth is irrelevant when it comes to the “science” of race.

Take another case. The Howards, a family of four, seem to be living the American Dream. But six-year-old Nicole has leukemia. When her parents tried to find a bone marrow donor, they were shocked to discover that Nicole did not exist. Physicians maintain monoracial donor lists, matching like with like. Since Nicole is a fusion of Japanese and European ancestries, the medical system had no list of possible donors. Distraught, her parents tried to locate a donor on their own, only to discover that no one knew how to find one, if they did exist. As her father told researchers Maria Root and Matt Kelley, “I learned how decades of being forced to check only one box had discouraged multiracial Americans from acknowledging their mixed race heritage.”<sup>6</sup>

Today the Seattle-based Mavin Foundation maintains the Matchmaker Bone Marrow Project. At last count, over six thousand people stepped up to help Nicole and her peers. But her awful dilemma underlines the lethal consequences of living in a world of one and only one box. Nicole could have died because American society still teaches its doctors and their patients to focus on racial purity, a concept that only exists in the mind of the beholder.

Fused ancestry people often stumble over unique, ugly problems because, until very recently, American society championed the ideal

of social mobility in a nation that simultaneously maintained castes based on color. Born poor, you could climb the ladder of success. Born white or black, you only married your own kind. Fully forty-one of the fifty states barred interracial marriage at one point or another because, as one Virginia judge told a white and black married couple on January 6, 1959, "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay, and red and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."<sup>7</sup>

This injunction is one reason mixed-race people hear the same question—"What are you?"—every day, week after week, year after year. It often comes from perfect strangers, gatecrashers who somehow believe they have the right to ask total strangers the most intimate questions about their family heritage.

People want to know because, according to American culture, mixed-race people should not exist. They represent the ultimate prohibition, and, if the Virginia judge's devilish thinking is more and more of an exception, the rest of us still learned to expect "pure" races. Recall, too, that large-scale migration of Asians, Indians, and Arabs is a very recent phenomenon. Americans kept the world at bay. We thrived on meat and potatoes, black on one side of the plate and white on the other.

On a deeper level, people ask "What are you?" because they see mixed-race people as threats to social order. Successful interactions can occur only when my assumptions match yours. For example, say "good-bye" when we first meet, and I have a problem. You are not doing what I learned to expect. But, if you extend your hand and shake mine as you say "glad to meet you," then all is well.

In relatively homogeneous states like Maine, Nebraska, Iowa, and Vermont, mixed-race people are still so out of the ordinary that their very presence sometimes sets off cultural alarms. Confronted with a Japanese/Guatemalan woman, white and black minds may be stymied. They are in the presence of a human conundrum. To get order in *their lives* they need a category so badly that otherwise polite white and black people may become extraordinarily rude.

One informant told me that his daughter-in-law was a fusion of Asian and Latino heritages. When his family had visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, they quietly and (they thought) unobtrusively strolled through the galleries. However, one older man kept staring at the young woman. Finally, he tapped her on the shoulder and said, "What are you?" The father-in-law was shocked, but the young woman was polite, gracious, and just a bit bored. She is asked the question so often that she has developed a form of permanent armor against the curious and sometimes dangerous intrusions into her private space.

Simple manners demand that men and women never approach a total stranger and ask, "What are you?" Yet it happens all the time; as I learned from Hilary on a Web page called "Swirl," "it is a big deal that people think they can be so blatantly rude to people like us. I have had many people come up to me and ask me if I'm mixed or what I am and they don't even ask for my name first." What is *our* problem? Why is it so urgent for us to get an answer that we disobey the most elementary forms of social etiquette?

A century ago, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote, "All relations among men are determined by varying degrees of incompleteness." I can never see the core of your individuality because I also see you—all the time—generalized to some degree. If I introduce my friend Paul, I ask you to meet the unique person who is simultaneously a member of the social category of friend. If I show you a picture of our three children—Adam, Carrie, and Ben—I introduce three individuals who are also social categories—children—and, besides that, members of a group, our family.

Simmel argued that social identities place a veil over our individuality. These labels—friend, child, black, white, mixed race—make us something different, but, like it or not, society collapses without shared and approved social identities. White and black often act as a sure guide to interaction in 2006 because they provide a shared set of beliefs and values about me and about others. Whites know how to behave with blacks and vice versa.

Social order never implies social justice. The two may exist simultaneously, but that was not Simmel's concern. He only wanted to



understand how society was possible, so he identified the social identities indispensable for successful interactions.

As walking question marks, mixed-race people offer no clues to interaction within a white/black dichotomy. I more or less urgently need a category as a guide to behavior, so when people rudely ask, “What are you?” it is because they need an answer in order to restore their sense of order. As Pearl Fuyo Gaskins has written, “we are inkblots . . . people see us and they project what they need onto us to make themselves feel comfortable.”<sup>8</sup> Once the “inkblot” has been interpreted, a person can be placed in a known category—for example, half this, half that—and given a mask to wear. Of course, if the mixed-race person refuses to play this game, they may be seen as antagonistic or even engaging in disorderly conduct.

Our current form of society is impossible if mixed-race people refuse to play along. They can create new categories and demand that we either learn them or go bother somebody else. It is a continuing conversation, but before we examine the new categories, the everyday lives of mixed-race people also allow *them* to observe and analyze *us*. We inadvertently reveal a great deal about American society and ourselves when we interact with mixed-race people. In what follows, I use an analysis of roughly two hundred biographical statements to spotlight three issues that typify the multiracial person’s experience with the rest of us.

### Hyperexposure, Invisibility, and the Border Patrol

*Donna Jackson Nakazawa* writes that mixed-race people often feel that they are “hyper-exposed.” Because their faces offer perplexing combinations to most Americans, these seven million men, women, and children are always on stage. On the subway, one young (Japanese and Colombian) woman found herself charged with treason. A Japanese woman—who was a total stranger—wanted to know why she surgically fixed her eyes. Was she ashamed of her obvious Japanese features?

Here are some additional examples of hyperexposure. Each focuses on a different side of the mixed-race experience. In New York, Adam Gelfand (Jewish and Japanese) grew up on a street with a code

for identifying gang threats, “kids who were coming into our block and were beating us up.” A one meant white, a two Hispanic, and a three black. Adam and his brother learned the code only to discover that they produced a new one. His friends said, “You guys are really dark like a code three, but you look like a code two, but you’re a code one, but you are not really a code one. What in the world are we going to do with you?” A year later, they came back and said, “We have something very special for you. You are a code JJ. Code one Jap-Jew.”<sup>9</sup> In this example, Adam is hyperexposed because he first fits into no categories and then gets a new one, all his own. Unfortunately, Jap/Jew makes him more exposed than ever.

Writing for *Eurasian Nation*, Catherine Betts talks about “checking the ‘other’ box.” She fears the experience because “checking the OT box is like walking into a room full of strangers and introducing myself as Barney. It is just as inconclusive and arbitrary.” It also reduces the “many luxuries” of being multiracial. Catherine richly experiences life from at least two perspectives; without ever going abroad to expand her horizons, she gets to see the positives and negatives of being Japanese and European. The box not only locks her in, but it also creates a weighty sense of defeat. She surrendered because checking the box allows others with power to define her in a simple manner. “I wonder if my multicultural ancestors are rolling over in their graves. But, even more so, I wonder how long it will take for the box to be defeated, and I wonder if the other ‘others’ out there are having the same existential dialogue with themselves about a silly box.”<sup>10</sup>

In this instance, Catherine is hyperexposed because of the “other” category and what it precipitates. Her monocultural friends check the appropriate box without thinking; they know who they are. Catherine, realizing how silly it is, nevertheless moderates an existential debate with a government-issue box that highlights her inability to fit into society’s approved categories.

Julie Fischer, a student at the University of California, Davis, offers a final example of hyperexposure. She joined the university’s hapa (Hawaiian for “half”) club, eager to participate in the group’s forums

and other activities. However, at one event she eventually became so upset with the group that she loudly raised this issue. "Instead of asking ourselves, 'who am I?' we should begin with asking, 'Why am I?'" The final straw was "a weird revelation." Half of the panelists existed because of military base marriages. "No one even discussed that little point that they are existing in this world because of U.S. military power/imperialism and the consequential barbaric/exoticism complex that is strung along in the military mentality when interacting with the local women."

In the system of American cultural prejudices, the "oriental" is exotic. Julie felt that she and the other students in the group only exist because their Asian mothers were the object of a fetish for that exoticism. The fetish is so contagious that even hapa men contract it. At a potluck supper of the Hapa Issues Forum, "all of the hapa guys stared at me and you know what? I felt like they were basically just white guys who just happened to have an Asian parent at home—what makes their fetish with me, a hapa, any different than when it is coming from a full white guy. I was insulted."<sup>11</sup>

Here the hyperexposure turns into a personal trait. Given a peculiar, positive prejudice of American society, Julie stands out. She is exotic, a fetish that makes her as special as one of the toys at the local adult video store. She dates but never knows if anyone is interested in her or if it is just the exotic quality that always puts her in the limelight. She is even exotic when she parties with her "own kind."

Hyperexposure is one side of the multiracial experience. The other side is invisibility, a maddening paradox to the youngsters who must nevertheless endure it.<sup>12</sup> Invisibility occurs when presumably sympathetic people of color say no to a multiracial category. This is especially apparent if it is a fight between whites and blacks. Some blacks regard recognition of multiracial people as a "white conspiracy," another plot to divide and further conquer black people. Others say that one drop of black blood makes you black. Why invent a new category when you are and always will be only black to white people. But perhaps the most powerful resistance comes from minority-group

leaders who fear that minorities will lose rights and entitlements if multiracial people are counted as a separate category.

Meanwhile, whites behave as badly toward multiracial people as blacks do. Jennifer Ho is a fusion of European (English, French, Irish, and Scottish) and Chinese ancestries. People tell her she is white, but making interaction impossible, Jennifer disagrees. If they say, "Yes you are," as they often do, the fight begins. Jennifer embraces all her heritages. Her antagonists want her to white out her double status and enlist in the best race of all. In fact, instead of asking why it is so important *to them* that Jennifer be white, her antagonists generally ask why she is making such a big deal out of it. "You look white, so you are white.' I've even had people say that I am lucky I can pass for white—that I should be grateful." Jennifer thinks differently; she refuses to be invisible, but "I think that it makes these people really uncomfortable and I think that they would just prefer that I let them think that I'm white."<sup>13</sup>

Schools function as a powerful source of racial categorization. However, even the best elementary and high schools often treat the multiracial child as the invisible student in row E, seat 4. Following federal guidelines, some schools simply slide the multiracial child into the box that most closely reflects everyday American prejudices. Jennifer Ho would thus have to check the white box. But, because she and her friends demand recognition as multiracial people, the federal government offered this advice to school systems: Add a new category if the need arises, but let the youngster check this box "only when the data gathering agency is prepared to assign the persons choosing this response option to a standard category for purposes of presenting aggregated information."

Visible when she completes the form, Jennifer somehow becomes invisible by the time that form is counted. There is no discrimination because "interracial children are not discriminated against since they are not discriminated against *as a member of a majority or minority race*" (emphasis added). Put differently, they cannot be subject to discrimination because they do not exist in the first place.<sup>14</sup>

In November 2005 the Mavin Foundation published findings of

similar invisibility at the nation's universities, colleges, and community colleges. The cover of the study shows a smiling young woman wearing a T-shirt labeled "blaxican"; meanwhile, in an analysis of close to 300 schools (from Stanford University to Western Wyoming Community College) the foundation discovered that only 27 percent of the institutions even "allow prospective students to identify themselves as having mixed heritage on admissions forms." Moreover, when it came to actually encoding the information, more than 60 percent of the schools recoded the information into categories that made the person "mono-racial." Only 9 of the 298 institutions actually "retained data on a student's *specific* racial/ethnic mixed heritage" (emphasis added). In the end the report's authors reluctantly confirmed their own invisibility: "Our report has found that the vast majority of institutions of higher education have failed to provide multiracial students with appropriate opportunities to identify their racial and ethnic heritages."<sup>15</sup>

One final example of invisibility occurred because of the reactions of family members. At the Claremont mixed race conference, a young man explained the consequences of his mother's Chinese and his father's Jewish ethnic roots. He explained that he had never even met his Jewish grandparents because they shunned him throughout his life. With tears in his eyes, he patiently explained the consequences of the mixed race experience. His grandfather had just died; he never met the man, and that loss and longing would be with him forever. Yet he still wanted to connect with the family that had treated him so badly.

The all-volunteer racial border patrol exists in all fifty states. In a conference workshop on Asian American identity, Kimiko Roberts (an Afro Asian) showed a baseball video that graphically illustrated her lack of acceptance by both the Chinese and the African American communities. Especially at the onset of adolescence, student racial police, without uniforms or badges, monitor the high school corridors. Since Kimiko involuntarily bats from both sides of the plate, she has no idea which side to use. Her classmates resolve the problem by telling her that she cannot play the all-American game. Her double racial status disqualifies herself from being a "whole" anything; she is

a “half breed,” shunned by her friends and sometimes even by her relatives. As Kimiko told the audience, one reason she created the video was to talk to her “racist” Chinese grandmother. She hoped that pictures would break down the borders created by her grandmother’s aversion to the color of Kimiko’s skin.

Racial police cordon off many areas of the multiracial child’s life. First is physical appearance. Jamie Doyle (Japanese, Irish, and Caucasian) wanted to join the Asian group at her university. She went to a meeting only to discover that, because of her ambiguous looks, she was “*not* Asian enough to be part of their organization.” Since Jamie lacked the “typical” features of Asian women, she failed the authenticity test as her cohort failed the decency test. They guarded the turf that only recognized pure people from pure races.<sup>16</sup>

Kevin Maillard is Native American and African American. He self-identifies as a Black Indian and notes that, since roughly 30 to 70 percent of African Americans possess Native American ancestors, to identify as a Black Indian is to have a mental attachment to a mixed ancestry. That is Kevin’s opinion; he is proud of his fused roots, and in high school he only wanted to be a member of the crowd. Unfortunately, his everyday life “was horrible.” Based on his features, multiple border patrols forced him to reach this conclusion: “It is a three pronged thing—you are not black, you are not white, you are not Indian. It comes from all directions.”<sup>17</sup>

The racial police also patrol the way others speak. One of my students is often accused by her African American friends of trying to be white because she speaks with a proper West Indian accent. This is a common experience among multiracial children who may claim two heritages but find that only one is sanctioned. One white/black youngster learned the dozens as a means to acceptance by his black friends. But, when he sometimes spoke standard English, his pals accused him of trying to be fake. He had to pick a side and remain loyal to it and it alone.

Another area of border control revolves around the friends you can keep. Tatyana Ali, who played Ashley Banks on the TV sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bellaire*, boasts a Panamanian mother and an East Indian father. She acted as a black person on the show but never denied nor

denies her heritages. Meanwhile, one evening in New York, she dined with her white boyfriend. One of her black fans appeared and made this comment: “Tatyana, I want you to know that I watch your show all the time. But now that I see you letting this white man date you, I will never watch your show again.”<sup>18</sup> This man patrolled borders that did not exist. He tried to keep Tatyana in the black circle when he really needed to offer a first-class ticket to the Caribbean. There she could easily find a Panamanian/East Indian spouse.

Racial policing is also geographical. You sit at one lunchroom table, with one racial crowd. Eat elsewhere and you can eat with them (the whites, the blacks) or you can eat alone. Who cares? You are no longer one of us. In a Manhattan high school, the patrolling reached such extremes that “White, Black, Latino and Asian students each exited the school from different doors.”<sup>19</sup> Fused ancestry children therefore had two choices: They could sleep at school or walk out under the staring eyes of the whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians. Pick a door and, if the guards let you through it, you pick your future, like it or not.

The border patrol even polices cultural capital. James Coley is a fusion of white and black who attended a predominantly white private high school. He did exceptionally well in his academic work, and his personality proved so appealing that he became class president. But James made his mark by using what others perceived as only white cultural capital. If he played great jazz, that was acceptable. But, as a successful scholar, he was told: “You know you are not really black—you are white because of all the accomplishments you have made.” This was not an honorary membership in the white race. Instead, it closed the wagons around the achievements that only white people could make. James was the exception that proved the borderline rule.<sup>20</sup>

Even music and sports are subject to the scrutiny of the border patrol. One multiracial man liked the music of Barry Manilow. He had to hide his tapes or his Latino friends would angrily accuse him of being “too white.” In another instance, a black/white fusion had the audacity to like hockey. He joined the school’s squad, only to discover that, for his black friends, this made him a “white boy.” Blacks apparently do not play hockey.

The combination of hyperexposure, invisibility, and the border patrol is a witch's brew. In their unmarked cars, the racial vigilantes are especially effective because no one knows when they will arrive. Just as the fused ancestry person is getting comfortable, a friend, family member, or antagonist whips out the race card in a discussion of anything from music to sports, from exit doors to the way you speak.

Young people are at once hyperexposed and invisible because many of us refuse to recognize the axis of their problem: race in America. Indeed, my interviews suggest that to many Americans fused ancestry people represent a group of whiners. Kids and adults have always been cruel to one another. What is so special about the daily dilemmas of mixed-raced Americans?

### Mirror on the Wall

In Disney's movie *Snow White* the young woman's beauty forced her stepmother, the queen, to see herself in the mirror. What she saw there was not how she imagined herself. Mixed-race people are our Snow White. And only we can change the image that appears as a result of our reaction to a simple fact: Human beings fall in love, they have children, and we treat those children in an abominable manner.

Here, for example, is an interesting contradiction: Many of the most powerful people in America ask us to embrace globalization. Our very salvation allegedly rests on trading with the rest of the world. Yet, when we analyze the treatment of mixed-race Americans, we appear as one of the most insular, provincial people on the planet.

Recall (from chap. 6) the portrait of Jamaican people in the painting *Dance Hall*. A fellow with lovely Asian features is in the middle of the picture because the artist is comfortable with the fusions produced in Jamaica. Similarly, on one trip to Cuba, our guide through the periodical archives was Federico Chang. For all their other problems, Cubans generally remain quite comfortable with fused ancestry children. However, for us, the provincial, blinkered dominance of white and black is so great that it even acts as a bludgeon when mixed-race people suddenly find that they are "cool."

A young woman named Abbie (Miyabi) Modry writes that, in her



circle of friends, “the values have become completely reversed to the point where people who don’t come from a ‘minority’ culture start feeling as if they are no one, they are too bland. Being ‘just white’ is not cool or anything admirable anymore (though this still depends on your social circle).”<sup>21</sup>

Abbie’s anger stems from a crucial insight: “The sad thing though is that the value reversal is entirely superficial because it still maintains the same mentality of neatly categorizing people along the same old lines.” A mixed-race person is cool only in relation to the whites who are bland. White remains the designer original and, adding insult to injury, using whites to make others cool only “reinforces the feeling that the categorizations are authentic and natural.” Even when people say something positive about mixed-race Americans, it stems from the white, nonwhite, people of color template. Somehow, we are to embrace the globe while still using the vocabulary of slave traders and Jim Crow America.

The mirror again suggests an observation made by Bruce Jacobs: “we strain our eyes looking for color and in the process lose all other senses.” Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, sixty years after *Mendez v. Westminster*, and ninety-one years after a judge decided (in the Shahid case) that Jesus was not a white man, our behavior is a form of “public insanity.”<sup>22</sup>

Built on the dichotomy and the concept of race, color sometimes appears to be a background issue. We think we are moving forward until, at the level of what makes society possible, seven million mixed-race people threaten to explode the dominating categories and colors. We do not know what to make of them so, rather than discard race and the dichotomy, we use those cultural tools to put mixed-race people in their place.

In the most intense instances, fused ancestry people drive categorical thinkers into a state of crisis. “The crisis is caused by the contradiction between how people have been trained to understand race and the fact that the multiracial person does not fit the scheme.” Confronted with information that threatens their categories and beliefs, people imitate a boomerang. They come back on themselves, retreat-

ing to the safety of the white/black dichotomy; and, once there, they affirm the dichotomy with more passion than ever as a means of convincing *themselves* that they do in fact know the right rules about race, color, and mismatches.<sup>23</sup>

One conclusion is that we use the words and beliefs invented by the worst Americans, all the while allowing people in crisis to lead the charge as they reinforce and resurrect the past. Remember the black fan hassling (Panamanian and East Indian) Tatyana Ali. Color is such a necessity that we use it to castigate a woman based on a case of maliciously mistaken identity.

Even the most well-intentioned Americans lack an alternative grammar or code of conduct; we use words with color because that is our cultural inheritance. To escape from our self-imposed prison we turn to the efforts of people interested in self-preservation. We turn to the fused ancestry population that, given our behavior, seeks to create a new way of looking at all Americans.

### The Doubles Who Live in Limboland

*I was raised* as a Roman Catholic and still recall the nuns teaching us about baptism and limbo. To wash away the stain of original sin, God used baptism. This divine dosing made us eligible to enter heaven and achieve the “beatific vision,” the actual sight of father, son, and Holy Ghost. Unfortunately, infants sometimes died before they received the sacrament of baptism. God, in his mercy, did not want to send these infants to hell. But, with the stain of original sin still on them, they could not enter heaven. God therefore created limbo. But limbo was not a way station on the road to heaven. The nuns explained that the infants stayed in limbo forever. They were never punished nor did they receive any rewards.

Catholics erased limbo roughly forty years ago. Mixed-race people rediscovered and redefined it in their Web and other conversations. Limboland is a place where people take pride in their mixed-race ancestry. “It sounds like we do not know where we are going or where we came from, no direction, no future,” one chat room correspondent commented. “That is incorrect. There is no consensus on who we

are, where we came from, what we are about, and where we are going.” Yet, in Limboland, “we are hotly debating all those issues (this is the most exciting time for Mixies) and there are definite patterns of thought . . . that are emerging from these debates.”<sup>24</sup>

For a more pessimistic assessment of life in Limboland, consider this metaphor from James McBride (a fusion of white and black): “Being mixed feels like that tingly feeling you have in your nose when you have to sneeze—you are hanging on there waiting for it to happen, but it never does.”<sup>25</sup>

Fusions can be excited, frustrated, angry, confused, and ambiguous about life in Limboland. They can also experience those feelings in combination, or they can experience different reactions on different days. How a person responds depends on a variety of variables. Some are outside of the person’s control. Some are not.

Fred McHenry Rabb (Japanese and African American) reflects a distinction between being a “minority-majority” and a “minority-minority.”<sup>26</sup> The language underlines our public insanity; however, the point is that a white/black fusion may experience even more tension and turmoil than an Asian/African American fusion. The latter always gets it from both sides; you definitely know you are unwanted. Meanwhile, the white/black person may receive a pass into mainstream America because of their partially white ancestry, only to be rebuffed when the black ancestry is discovered. You suddenly have that tingly feeling again because exposure reveals your true identity: You are a mixed-race American.

Jennifer Poulson (Japanese and white) grew up in Japan. Many people there expressed envy, seeing her whiteness as something positive. On the streets, other kids called her “*gaijin*, *gaijin*.” Dictionary definitions for this word include “foreigner,” but the negative meaning implied is “outsider,” someone who can never be Japanese. But although Jennifer was being sent these mixed messages, she was at a distinct advantage in attending international schools. “I was surrounded by likeminded ‘half’ kids, as we referred to ourselves,” she writes. “I was not an anomaly or an aberration. I was one of many mixed kids and everyone knew exactly what we were.”<sup>27</sup>

School was a place to relax. That is a gift because fusions must

deal—above all—with the issue of being half. As a (border patrol) axis of identity, “half” generates so much pain that it also produces a widespread consensus. Indeed, despite the many variables that help or hinder “adjustment,” fusions can tell us precisely what they hate, exactly what Anglo Protestant culture needs to abolish.

Kanna Livingston (Japanese and white) talks about the people she continually meets. “Oh, so you’re half Japanese, they’ll say, their eyes shining with clarity. They will say ‘half’ exactly the way it is typed. And I wince at hearing those words, feeling somehow compressed, restricted, and excluded from the ‘pure breeds.’”

Kanna gets no pedigree certificate because she is an impure mix. Yet, “if I am half Japanese, then where does that half end? Where do I begin not being Japanese? Would a bar of chocolate have to introduce itself as being ‘half’ chocolate, ‘half’ milk? Do people start off their conversations at sophisticated cocktail parties saying, Oh, I am half of my father’s genes and half of my mother’s? How about you?”<sup>28</sup>

Sometimes, a single encounter can be literally traumatic. “I still can’t forget the shock I felt when I was nine and a friend drew an imaginary line that spilt me in half,” Abbie Modry recalls. “How strange it must have been that somehow my right leg wasn’t shorter than my left, and that my eyes weren’t blue on the left and brown on the right . . . that was no joke and till today remains a vivid and hurtful memory fifteen years later.”

The imaginary lines assume special significance when race is the issue. Millions of Americans can discuss, casually and often with great delight, ethnicities that include Finnish, Scottish, and English heritages without once asking the person to draw lines through their face. How absurd it would be if someone said, “The left eye is Irish; the right is definitely from Scotland.”

Abbie continues, “Half makes you sound like you are only half a person, and therefore inferior to the non-half person.” The defense that “I just wanted to know” holds no water when people ask the “What are you?” question with such frequency. If it does not matter, why ask? As Abbie sees it, whether it is the word *half* or the modern, neutral word *mixed*, the consequences for her remain the same. She notes that “it might help to see what the possible antonyms to mixed (or half)

are: One possibility is “non-mixed” but there must be another more common word . . . Oh! Pure. That is it. No? But strange then, isn’t the opposite of pure, impure, contaminated, diluted, etc. Yeah, well, that is often the connotation mixed (or half) carries.”<sup>29</sup> When Abbie correctly feels angry and awful about other people’s use of the word *half*, she is listening, in 2006, to a tape recording of the terrible testimony of so many congressmen during the immigration hearings in 1924.

Sometimes, even the fusions at times accept the language and beliefs that, instead of being anachronistic, are actually alive and well. In reading through the biographies of fused ancestry people, you often see this: Connor, Japanese + Caucasian + Native American. Alexis, Mexican + Caucasian. Will, African American + Caucasian + Blackfoot.<sup>30</sup> When fusions self-identify using the personal prejudices of a man obsessed with the Caucasus Mountains, the power of the operating system is vividly underlined.

In general, the young people debating their ancestry know what they oppose. The real problem is what they propose and how they can convince the rest of us to accept their proposals.

One often hears three examples of new social identities: swirl, double, and fusion. In one mixed race conference workshop, a father artfully transformed a gallon of ice cream into a teaching tool. Chocolate represented his daughter’s African roots; strawberry represented her Native American heritage; and vanilla represented her European ancestry. He explained that he had told his daughter to put three scoops of ice cream in a bowl and combine them in a swirl of colors. Once fused, no one could separate the elements. So, why worry about purity, when swirls are the human norm?

It is an image that, as with Richard Rodriguez’s *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, focuses on combinations as the human norm but, unfortunately, still uses color to define human beings. Would swirls line up with whites, blacks, and nonwhites? Would swirl be better and the other colors worse? However lovely as an image, critics stress that swirl adds another colorful category rather than transcending those categories.

*Double* is another word with promise. Unlike swirl, it completely avoids, for almost the first time in five hundred years, the use of any

suggestion of color. *Double* suggests the joining of ethnicities in a unique synthesis, but, in addition, it offers a sense of self-esteem that acts as a badge of pride when the border patrol agents appear. As one double emphasizes, “one thing I really like about the term ‘double,’ and where you can sense the warm gaze and encouraging attitude of the parent who first came up with the term is that it emphasizes that we are ‘full’ individuals in each and both of our communities, not only ‘half.’”<sup>31</sup>

The word *double* reconfigures cultural elements in a manner that allows the person to transcend half and all its negative connotations. While that is an obvious benefit, debate participants also perceive problems. What do you do with people who have three or four ethnic heritages? Are they triples or even quadruples? And is a triple better than a double? The new language is necessary to achieve a sense of self-esteem in a society that denies it, but, in the process, no one wants to start a race in which some people get more self- and social esteem than others do. In addition, “double makes you sound like you are two people in one person’s body and that you are more impressive than a non-double person. Strange, huh? As an extension of the strangeness, it also contains the problem of burdening yourself to be just as ‘fully’ one as the other.”<sup>32</sup>

The last term, *fusion*, indicates the creation of something unique, and it never relies on race or blood to define or separate either individuals or groups of human beings. Mothers and fathers obviously provide the genes that make us look different; but what we think of those differences is a sociological, not a biological, fact. Fusions therefore believe that all people contain combinations of ancestries. Human life is a ceaseless series of fusions, none necessarily better than another. Fusions judge people on what they say and do, never because of prejudices rooted in an operating system that teaches about pure and impure, whole and half.

As Stefanie Liang (German + Chinese) puts it, “what is beautiful about us [about fusions] is that we embody harmony and we transcend racism in many ways.” For a more down-to-earth definition, Lee Swift (Japanese + Black) says, “I feel like everything is just meshed together. There is nothing you can really separate. All my cultures and

colors just mixed together . . . I even had the same food on one plate. Sometimes I had beans on the plate, and some kind of Japanese food. And that's how I felt about myself. It was all in my mind, all in one plate."<sup>33</sup>

*Fusion* avoids all the negative connotations associated with *half* or *mixed*. Once joined, nothing separates the ingredients. They fuse in a unique manner and affirm our shared humanity because all six billion of us represent more or less complex fusions. However, as the daily debate proceeds, fusions need to decide the exact nature of the fused ingredients. If those ingredients include races, fusion is an improvement that never challenges traditional conceptions. If, on the other hand, fusions deny the existence of races, they create a concept that focuses only on ethnic groups. Ultimately, saying that I have Chinese and German ethnicities could be as significant or as harmless as saying that I have an English and Italian background.

Swirl, double, fusion: Using Internet forums on an everyday basis, the thoughtful dialogue occurs in a society that, by definition, makes successful assimilation impossible. Seven million people remain forever outside the Anglo Protestant mainstream, so, as a response, some fusions express a sense of angst that borders on desperation. David Horowitz (white and Japanese) writes, "Some people never experience the differences that we encounter from being half-Asian, but these experiences have made me feel that I'm not really anything. But instead in my own world of culture that I have built as a result of isolation . . . I typically feel isolated from society because I don't feel like I fit into the mold of anything out there."<sup>34</sup>

Another, much more positive reaction is that of Chela Delgado. Her mother is European American (Scottish), and her father is African American (Jamaican, East Indian). Chela says that she and her "biracial" friend developed a strategy. They hate feeling like the only white people in a black meeting and the only black people in a white group. It is both boring and tiresome to be the outsider all the time. Their new philosophy is this: "Being biracial isn't hard because we are confused about our racial identity. It is hard because everyone else is confused. *The problem isn't us—it's everyone else.*"<sup>35</sup>

Chela's reaction promises the full-scale mutiny that is on the horizon. As their numbers increase, more and more fusions will unite and refuse to accept the sense of alienation and inferiority that comes with being "mixed race" in the land of the pure. However, until the rebels think their way out of Limboland, Anglo Protestant culture is their bane and our problem. In fact, contemporary society is such a danger to the health of children that the parents of fusions devise strategies to shield their daughters and sons from everyday life.

### Survival Strategies

*In his book "Mind, Self and Society,"* the social psychologist George Herbert Mead uses baseball as a metaphor for understanding the "successful" socialization of any child. To play well a person needs to understand themselves in relation to eight other players in the field, the batter, any runners on base, and the coaches giving orders from the sidelines. When I understand my role in the game and, simultaneously, the roles of at least nine other people, I can "play ball" because others successfully taught me the rules of the game.

For Mead baseball serves as a metaphor to underline the crucial significance of culture in shaping our beliefs, values, and practices. Whenever children learn something about themselves, they also learn something about others. It may be, as in baseball, how those others fit into something as innocent as a game, or it may be the less benign "game" of categorizing people based on race and the color of your skin.

For parents of mixed-race children one crucial issue always arises: How much do you tell them about the often ugly rules of the game? And what do you do when this happens to your child? As George Meyers (Japanese/Caucasian) explains it, he went to a Japanese school on Saturday mornings. His classroom contained a "huge rolling chair" and "when the teacher was not in the room kids would take turns riding in the chair around the class and they would punch me as they went by. I would curl up in a ball or try to run away, but the other kids would hold me down."<sup>36</sup>



In the seventies, many parents believed that love could solve everything. Ignore differences, never discuss racial issues, and the love and acceptance received at home would act as a shield against any prejudice the child experienced. In practice, love failed because the children inevitably learned how Americans played the game, and, in the absence of any discussion at home, the kids took the abuse on the streets and sometimes drew the conclusion that, despite the lip service paid to love, there was something wrong with them. They were so insignificant that no one took the time to discuss issues at the core of their identity and their everyday life.

Today parents of fusion children realize that “dialogue is everything.” Their sons and daughters will inevitably experience a series of nasty incidents so, as parents, they must be available on an as-needed basis. Instead of a castle, home must be a sanctuary where the children feel comfortable enough to discuss issues that may hurt their parents as much as they hurt the children.

Some adolescents refrain from telling their parents what they feel because the kids know that their parents cannot change society or they hate to see their parents experience pain when the youngster explains an especially troubling incident. Somehow, parents need to create a sanctuary that is so comfortable everyone is willing to share their emotional lives. In a society where some argue that the significance of race is declining, one parent stresses that “this conversation is so ongoing in our house that when I ask my kids . . . questions like, ‘What was school like?’ or, ‘Has anyone questioned you?’ they know *exactly* what I’m talking about. They know why I’m asking, I’m not *looking* to find something, but they know that if something comes up, it is an open forum and we can discuss it as much as they want to.”

Some parents provide what Maria Root calls a “Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People.” As a multiracial person I have the right “*not* to justify my existence in this world, *not* to keep the races separate within me, *not* to be responsible for people’s discomfort with my physical ambiguity, and *not* to justify my ethnic legitimacy.”<sup>37</sup> Using these rights, the child builds a sense of self-esteem only by ignoring Anglo Protestant culture. However, that culture still rules because the child requires a series of negative rights only because the larger society

wants him or her to justify his or her existence and to keep the races separate.

These kids stick out by definition, yet, as Jamie Doyle (Japanese/Irish/Caucasian) writes, “my middle school was *not* diverse but I grew up in Southern California, which was very multicultural. We not only had all the races, there were also a lot of other multiracial Japanese/Caucasian families . . . That really helped to keep me from feeling like I was really weird, despite all the difficult things that were happening to me at school.”

In the absence of other fusion children, one alternative is “a familiar consistent group of friends with whom a child develops strong emotional bonds, before racial awareness and a playground culture of cruelty . . . converge.” While this suggestion assumes that the family remains in one location for a considerable period, friends love and value the child for who they are, not what they are. Obviously, the friends may also buy into the prejudices of the larger society, but, if parents can find open-minded families, children in isolated states at least have a welcome mat that is always available.

Donna Jackson Nakasawa notes that “among the most crushing experiences” she heard from multiracial children involved school systems and teachers who refused to validate what the children learned at home. Some teachers told the kids that they got a color identity and nothing more. Others “held stereotypical assumptions that black/white multiracial kids would under perform or that Asian/white kids would outperform because of gross stereotypes attached to students of these minority heritages.”

Parents need to check on the content of the school’s curriculum and they need to fight the school systems that deny their children’s existence. In an ideal world, school administrators and teachers would support the parents, but this gargantuan task requires support from a communitywide if not a nationwide effort. While a lone parent can sometimes fight and beat city hall, the chances of success significantly decrease when the issue is a topic that cuts to the core of American culture. For example, one suggestion is to provide children with biracial heroes like Frederick Douglass. His father was white, but black studies programs appropriate him as a black and only a black man. To

wage that battle in the classroom is to challenge the very structure of our cultural operating system. It is a crash that should occur, but it is hard to see how until and unless many of the rest of us *also* decide that fusions and their parents undeservedly carry the heaviest burden imposed by America's focus on race and skin color.

Fusion parents find themselves locked into a process where they continually play only defense. They shield the children from society as best as they can, fully aware that when they use labels like "multiracial" or "biracial" they feed into and even affirm the status quo. As Monina Diaz (African American/Puerto Rican) argues, "I think the worst thing to do would be to put a multiracial category in the census because, in effect, you would be buying into the system that you've detested all your life, a system that pressures you to fit into some group. So now you have a group, and now you fit into it, but what does that do for racial problems in America? I would hate to see the creation of more racial divisions."<sup>38</sup>

While parents understand the problem, the only alternative is to use labels that make their child a guinea pig for social change. Words like *double* or *fusion* house new beliefs, but fusions can never pleasingly interact with the rest of us if we refuse to reconfigure—consciously and voluntarily—American culture. At times, a parent's sense of frustration understandably produces raw and rough responses. Susan Fu (Caucasian) married a Chinese American man. They have three lovely children. Yet Susan fields "endless questions." In line with her daughter at a bagel store, another customer asked, "Is she one of the Children of China?" On another occasion, "a man actually asked me, 'Does she speak English?'" Finally, "another time a woman asked me where my children were from, and I told her 'they're mine,' and she said, 'I know they are *yours*, but where did they come *from*?' So I said, 'They're from my uterus.'<sup>39</sup>

While that is a great answer, it makes no sense to the person asking the question. The problem is that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our racial operating system still makes it inconceivable to many Americans that Chinese people live in the United States and that they marry and have all-American children. Susan Fu endures the endless series of painful questions because she and her children are

*impossible creations* from the perspective of the prevailing beliefs, values, and practices.

For serious change to occur, we all need to help fusions and their parents take the offensive. Fusions are an increasingly integral part of America's future. They walk alongside Chicanos, Latinos, Jamaicans, Asians, Arabs, and Indians. It is a new America, and it urgently requires another operating system if we are to eliminate race and the colorful dichotomy provided by slave traders and, more recently, Jim Crow.