

12

An Invisible Monster: The Creation and Denial of Mixed-Race People in America

CYNTHIA L. NAKASHIMA

When I ask a class of undergraduates to define the concept of "race," they usually give answers that sound something like, "A person's race is the group that he or she belongs to, such as European American or African American or Asian American or Latino or Native American." When I ask them then to tell me what factors or characteristics constitute a racial group, they talk about heredity, physical appearance, culture, language, community, and political ideology, in roughly that order. But when, at this point, I ask the class which racial group I fit into, they become very quiet. To some people I seem "White." To other people I seem "Asian." To still others who do not know my last name or my field of research, I seem Latino or Polynesian. To those who are from Hawaii or otherwise familiar with people of mixed Asian-European descent, I seem like a "hapa." But even those cosmopolitan individuals who identify my "race" correctly have a hard time answering my original question: What is race? And further, what race is a person of mixed race?

Interestingly, when I ask the same group of undergraduate students to list their images and stereotypes of people of mixed race, they quite confidently express ideas such as the following: Mixed-race people have a hard time adjusting to their multiple cultures; mixed people

feel rejected by both or all of their groups; people who are mixed are always really attractive. But is it not strange, I ask them, that they, as representatives of American society, hold such clearly defined images of and attitudes about people of mixed race, while at the same time they are not able to answer the question of where multiracial people fit into the racial order of U.S. society?

This chapter explores two seemingly conflicting, yet actually mutually reinforcing, strategies that the dominant U.S. culture has adopted in dealing with people of multiple racial heritages. The first strategy has been the creation and definition of multiracial people as a group, through the development of biological, sociocultural, and sociopolitical theories and attitudes; the second strategy has been the denial of the existence of multiracial people, both as individuals and as a group.

Mixed-Race People Making Chaos in an "Ordered" Society

Today, social scientists agree that race is a socially constructed, as opposed to a biologically concrete, concept (Fields, 1982; Omi & Winant, 1986; Spickard, Chapter 2, this volume). This is evident in that race has been and is defined in vastly different ways at different times and in different places. Every society has its own socially constructed definition of *race*—and its own definitions of *ethnicity*, *culture*, *community*, *gender*, and so on.

But what happens when an individual or a group of individuals in a particular society subvert one or more of the accepted definitions by their very existence? And what if they go as far as to demand a restructuring and a reconceptualizing of definitions altogether? Just as people who are transsexual, homosexual, and bisexual have upset and challenged the general understanding of gender, sexuality, and family in mainstream American society,¹ people who are multiracial and multicultural have always upset, and are just now beginning to challenge, the understanding of race, ethnicity, culture, and community in the United States. As Omi and Winant (1986) observe:

One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about who a person is. The fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter some-

one whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially “mixed.” . . . Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis of racial meaning. Without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity. (p. 60)

People who do not neatly fit into a clearly defined race category threaten the psychological and sociological foundations of the “we” and “they” mentality that determines so much of an individual’s social, economic, and political experience in the United States. Mainstream American culture and ideology have been informed by a dominant perception that race is something absolute—that each person is either/or, and that races are mutually exclusive.² If a person, by birth, belongs to and identifies with more than one racial and cultural group, the monoracially “hegemonic” American culture is forced either to adjust the system to make room for the person or to adjust the person to fit into the system. At least partially because of, and in order to avoid, this dilemma, the United States has had laws prohibiting interracial sex and marriage for most of its history, from the 1600s to 1967 (Kitano & Kikumura, 1973; Spickard, 1989).

But, regardless of both formal and informal prohibitions against their existence, millions of mixed-race people have been born in the United States over the years, in addition to hundreds of thousands who have been born to American citizens outside of the United States. In order to protect the social order that depends so heavily on clear racial boundaries, it has historically been the people of mixed race who have been shaped and molded by dominant society to uphold and to fit into the American system. An exploration of how this has been done not only supplies significant insight into the history of mixed-race people in the United States, but is also very instructive in the study of the formation of racial ideology in America (Fields, 1982; Omi & Winant, 1986).

The Creation of a Multiracial Mythology

Although it is seldom recognized, people of mixed race, like people of other racial and ethnic groups, have their own socially constructed image in American dominant culture. Legislation, with all of its rhetoric, has been aimed directly at multiracial people and their families; religious ideology has been espoused regarding the morality of the creation of multiracial humans; scientific and academic theories

have been proposed regarding the biological, psychological, and sociological aspects of multiraciality; and the venues of popular culture—fiction and nonfiction literature, newspaper and magazine articles, television, film, music, comic books, and pornography—have defined a particular set of stereotypes and images specifically related to people of multiracial heritage. As with all “minority” groups, there has been and continues to be a dialectical relationship between these laws, religious ideology, and scientific and social scientific theories and popular cultural ideology, the outcome being a flexible sort of “folk wisdom” about multiracial people.

Although not every theory or attitude or image regarding people of mixed race has been negative, the majority of the ideology has been troublesome. The attack on intermarriage and multiraciality has traditionally been asserted in two ways: (a) in relation to biological reasoning³ (that it is “unnatural” to “mix the races”; that multiracial people are physically, morally, and mentally weak; that multiracial people are tormented by their genetically divided selves; and that intermarriage “lowers” the biologically superior White race), and (b) in relation to sociocultural reasoning (that people of mixed race are socially and culturally marginal, doomed to a life of conflicting cultures and the unfulfilled desire to be “one or the other,” neither fitting in nor gaining acceptance in any group, thus leading lives of confused loneliness and despair). In the last couple of decades the argument has shifted to a more sociopolitical one: People of color who marry Whites are trying to “raise” themselves economically, socially, and racially; intermarriage and multiracial people represent the loss or the “dilution” of distinct ethnic and racial groups; and mixed-race people and their families have dubious political and social loyalties.

The Biological Argument

HYBRID DEGENERACY THEORY

The once widely accepted theory of “hybrid degeneracy” states that people of multiracial heritage are genetically inferior to both (or all) of their parent races. Multiracial people are described as having no strength in the physical, mental, emotional, or moral senses, leading to early deaths and the inability to reproduce, and thus ultimately to group (and even human) extinction (Castle, 1926; Krauss, 1941; Pro-

vine, 1973; W. C. Smith, 1939). The growth of this idea, and of the scientific research done to support it, began around the end of the Civil War, and went on until the mid-1930s, becoming especially well developed with the rediscovery of Mendelism in the early 1900s and the growth of the eugenics movement (Provine, 1973).

The primary function of hybrid degeneracy ideology has been to keep the dominant White race "pure" and in power, separate and superior, both by discouraging White people from marrying and/or having children with people of color and by making sure that all of those people who had already been born racially mixed could not claim any privilege for their European ancestry. As mentioned earlier, antimiscegenation laws were put into effect as early as the colonial days, and they did not disappear from many states until as recently as 1967. The arguments justifying these laws were very often related to the supposedly malign consequences of the creation of multiracial people. For example, in 1896, a judge forbade an interracial marriage based on the following biological reasoning:

The amalgamation of the races is not only unnatural, but is always productive of deplorable results. Our daily observation shows us, that the offspring of these unnatural connections are generally sickly and effeminate, and that they are inferior in physical development and strength, to the full blood of either race. (Sickels, 1972, p. 48)

That the antimiscegenation laws were aimed at marriages between Whites and non-Whites, not at marriages between two racially different non-Whites, is indicative of the ultimate concern with keeping the White race apart from all others (Spickard, 1989; Weinberger, 1966).

RELIGION AND HYBRID DEGENERACY

Interestingly, hybrid degeneracy theory also played a part in the American "Westward movement." Before, during, and for some time after the Mexican-American War, both the genetic and the theological aspects of the hybrid degeneracy theory were utilized as an "explanation" for the inability of the mestizo Mexicans to run their own country successfully, and thus as a justification for the United States to seize a large part of Mexico for itself (Pettit, 1980). The connection between the scientific and theological aspects of hybrid degeneracy comes from the idea that what is "unnatural" is also against God's wishes. In merging religion and morality with a more "practical"

social Darwinism, the impact of the ideology could probably reach a wider audience of "believers."

THE MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF HYBRID DEGENERACY

Actually, by the time of the Civil War and the Mexican-American War, the American public had already become familiar with the tormented, pathetic, and often dangerous multiracial Black-White and Indian-White, and to some extent the Mexican-White, all of whom were favorite character types in mainstream fictional literature (Berzon, 1978; Elfenbein, 1989; Pettit, 1980; Scheick, 1979).⁴ As stated earlier, one aspect of the hybrid degeneracy theory is that multiracial people exhibit psychological and emotional problems stemming from their "unnatural blend" (Krauss, 1941). They were (and, to some extent, still are) characterized as depressive, moody, discontent, irrational, impulsive, fickle, criminal, chronically confused, emotionally unstable, constantly nervous, and ruled by their passions—all because of an internal disharmony between the genetically determined characters of their two parent races (Berzon, 1978; Bogle, 1989; Elfenbein, 1989; Scheick, 1979; Stedman, 1982).

In Berzon's (1978) study of the mulatto in American fiction, she discusses how the "tragic mulatto" character is often cast as irrational, moody, and completely tormented by his or her "racial disharmony," "clash of blood," and "unstable genetic constitution," typically dying while still young. She quotes a 1950 novel by Elizabeth Coker, *Daughter of Strangers*: "The idea of the mixed river of her blood was whirling in her brain and in her troubled, uneasy frame of mind she had become a stranger to herself" (Berzon, 1978, p. 104). This description of a multiracial African-European is similar to the description of a mixed Japanese-European in the 1921 book *Kimono*: "A butterfly body with this cosmic war shaking it incessantly. Poor child! No wonder she seems always tired" (Paris, 1921, p. 87).

The "scientific" contribution to the idea that multiracial people have emotional and mental problems is evident in the writings of Charles Benedict Davenport, the one-time "leading advocate of eugenics in the United States" (Provine, 1973). In his article titled "The Effects of Race Intermingling," Davenport (1917) elaborates on his scientific beliefs: "One often sees in mulattos an ambition and push combined with intellectual inadequacy which makes the unhappy hybrid dissatisfied with his lot and a nuisance to others" (p. 366).

MORAL AND SEXUAL ASPECTS OF HYBRID DEGENERACY

Perhaps the most common and most constant offshoot of the biological-psychological profile of people of mixed race is the stereotype that they are sexually immoral and out of control. This is especially true of multiracial women—whether they be “half-breed” Indian, Mexican “mestiza,” “mulatta,” or “Eurasian,” they are consistently imaged as extremely passionate and sexually promiscuous (Berzon, 1978; Bogle, 1989; Elfenbein, 1989; Pettit, 1980; Scheick, 1979; Stedman, 1982).

Several factors have played a part in the creation of this stereotype, which is prevalent not only in the United States, but also in many Asian countries.⁵ First of all, multiracial people are racial minorities in most countries, and have been labeled as immoral and uncivilized in the same way that racial and ethnic minorities are often characterized by the dominant racial and ethnic group.

Second, in social orders that promote in-group sex and marriage, any person who engages in a relationship with an outsider is considered to be psychologically or socially abnormal. Often they are labeled as immoral, sexually deviant, and/or sexual in an uncontrolled, illicit way (Castle, 1926; Lehrman, 1967). The image of the master and the slave, of a man in a foreign country and an indigenous prostitute, of the rape of a White woman by a man of color, and, most recently, of an “ugly American” and a “mail-order bride” are on one hand horrifying and on the other hand titillating, and are inherited by the multiracial population from their hypothetical parentage. Abolitionists used the “tragic mulatto” stereotype as a prime example of the immorality of slave owners and the institution of slavery (Berzon, 1978; Dearborn, 1986; Elfenbein, 1989). The pathetic “Amerasian” has been utilized by the media as a mechanism to berate American men (most often those in the military) who have engaged in extramarital sex overseas. The mixed-race person is seen as the product of an immoral union between immoral people, and is thus expected to be immoral him- or herself.

A third possible factor in this stereotype is that multiracial people are physical reminders of the biological nature of sex and love. No stories about storks delivering babies can explain how a “Black-looking” baby can have a White or an Asian mommy, or how a Eurasian can look like an Asian person with blond hair and blue eyes. The genetics of reproduction are, as they say, written all over the faces of mixed-race people.

And finally, multiracial females are especially likely targets for sexual objectification because of their real and perceived vulnerability as a group. By this I mean that multiracial women are characterized in academics and in popular culture as vulnerable in the sense that they are mentally, emotionally, morally, and socially weak, powerless, and tormented, and very often the product of sexual and racial domination. At the same time, many multiracial women are, in fact, vulnerable in a social, political, and economic sense. Because of the structure of power and domination in the American gender system (as well as in many other gender systems), weakness and vulnerability can be very exciting and attractive when applied to females. Elfenbein (1989) locates this theme, which she calls the “sexualization of powerlessness” as latent but consistent in the “tragic octoroon” stories that she has studied.

The interplay of the “sexualization of powerlessness” and the real and perceived vulnerability of certain mixed-race groups can create situations where stereotypes of immorality are recreated and reinforced (Gibbs, 1987; Root, 1990). An example of this is the case of many young Amerasian women in both Vietnam and the Vietnamese American community. Amerasians have very few job options, as being racially different and from nonintact families has left many of them uneducated and ineligible for most jobs in both Vietnam and the United States (Felsman, Johnson, Leong, & Felsman, 1989). The Vietnamese consider both Amerasian men and women to be “low class” and “troublemakers,” with prostitute mothers and worthless fathers who abandoned them. Thus Amerasian women are often labeled and treated as prostitutes, which functions to encourage many to become prostitutes, often after having been raped or sexually abused in Vietnam or in refugee processing centers (see Valverde & Chuong, Chapter 11, this volume).

HYBRID DEGENERACY AND PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The discussion of sexual myths about mixed-race people brings up the related issue of physical attractiveness. The idea that multiracial people are beautiful and handsome is one of the most persistent and commonly accepted stereotypes, both historically and contemporarily. This seemingly “positive” image is actually very complex, and needs to be questioned and studied very carefully. For example, is it because multiracial people who are part Caucasian often look like

"Anglicized" versions of people of color that they are considered to be handsome and beautiful? This could help to explain why so many of the "Black" and "Asian" actors and actresses in U.S. media are actually multiracial. On the other hand, for those who are attracted to people with "exotic" looks, multiracial people are often extra exotic looking in that they do not look much like any designated racial and ethnic group. Also, the idea that multiracials are attractive might very well be connected to the stereotype discussed earlier that they are vulnerable and linked to unbridled and illicit sex.

It is really very interesting that people of mixed race have become "known" for having attractive physical appearances, since one of the assertions of the hybrid degeneracy theory was that multiracial people could inherit "disharmonious" physical features from their various parent races. For example, some scientists hypothesized that multiracial people might have circulatory systems too long or big for their bodies, arms and legs that are not compatible in length, and teeth too big or too small for their mouths (Provine, 1973). In Fleming's (1939) scientifically questionable study of mixed-race children in England, he "discovered" that 10% of the biracial African-European persons he examined had a "disharmony of jaws . . . resulting where a well arched jaw was inherited from the negro side and a badly arched one from the white side" (p. 68). Fleming also reports that a significant number of the biracial Asian-European persons he studied had one eye with a "Mongolian fold" and one Caucasian-shaped eye.

THE THEORY OF MEDIOCRITY AND HYBRID VIGOR

Not everyone who has been concerned with the biological consequences of race mixing has believed in the theory of hybrid degeneracy. Many academics and laypersons have claimed that multiracial people, when they are partly Caucasian, are "superior" to their monoracial Black, Indian, and Asian counterparts. This has especially been the case in regard to people of African-European American descent, whom many scholars (and slave owners) have labeled as genetically and culturally superior to Blacks, but as genetically and culturally inferior to Whites (Castle, 1926; Park, 1931; Spickard, Chapter 2, this volume). It is interesting to note that while this was a common sentiment during slavery, when anyone with "one drop of Black blood" was still legal chattel, after abolition Black-White multiracials were overwhelmingly imaged as degenerate and very dangerous (Berzon, 1978).

Some of the more "progressive" academics actually advised that racial minorities be amalgamated with the White group, genetically and socially, so as to raise their position on the hierarchical scale (Gulick, 1914; Provine, 1973). But the more common sentiment was that by allowing Whites to mix biologically with the other races, the superior White race would be "degraded" to the midpoint position that multiracial people occupy (Castle, 1926; Provine, 1973). There were, too, a minority of scientists who considered the possibility of "hybrid vigor"; that is, that multiracial people might inherit the best qualities of their parent groups and actually be healthier, smarter, and better looking than monoracial people (Krauss, 1941). This sentiment is disturbing in its own way, as there is no objective basis for determining what is "best" and what is "worst" about any particular racial or cultural group. Also, the image of the "best of both worlds" is just as "otherworldly" as the hybrid degeneracy "worst of both worlds," leaving people of mixed race as the perpetual "other."

The Sociocultural Argument

THE MIXED-RACE PERSON AS MARGINAL MAN

It seems that around World War II and the horror of the Holocaust, with its Nazi biological determinism, the scholarly argument against multiracial people shifted from a biological one to an argument based on socialization and cultural reasoning (Provine, 1973). Multiracial people were now described as being unable to deal with their biculturalism—their conflicting cultures left them torn and confused, and their nonacceptance by either or any racial group meant that they were pathetically marginal and outcast, left to be the target of both of their parent groups' anger and hatred for one another (Fleming, 1930; Park, 1931; W. C. Smith, 1939). Actually, there is very little real difference between the cultural and biological arguments against miscegenation and multiracial people; both connote a hierarchy, with the Caucasian race and European-originated culture on the top and all other races and cultures on the bottom.

Stonequist (1937) names the "racial hybrid" as the "most obvious" type of marginal man. He declares that there are no biological problems with race mixture, only societal problems, which can account for whatever "inferiority" multiracial people might exhibit. He gives

several descriptions of the personality characteristics of different populations of multiracial people, assigning them such problems as inferiority complexes, "exaggerated self-consciousness," restlessness, and discontentedness. He says that multiracial people in South Africa and Jamaica function as a buffer zone between the Whites and Blacks, hated and abused by both sides, and that the Eurasians of India and the multiracial African-Europeans of South Africa and Jamaica long to be White and "ape" White ways.

In the media, the multiracial's problems with being both bicultural and socially marginal have consistently made for many fascinating story lines in books, films, and even songs. Stedman (1982) says of his research on American images of Native Americans, "Curiously enough, fiction writers generally saw more difficulties in being part Indian than in being all Indian, primarily because of the consequences of living in two worlds, a situation that writers liked to give full play" (p. 198). Berzon (1978) feels that this is also true of the multiracial Black-White character, who is a longtime fictional favorite, and who is "defined in terms of his marginal position within the culture" (p. 13). It has certainly been the case in the vast majority of the literature that I have looked at in my own research on mixed-race Asian-European characters.

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MARGINAL MAN

But Stedman and others have found that the fictional mixed-blood characters' unique social position could also prove dangerous to White society, as, in the Indian-White case, the "half-breeds" sometimes "made evil use of their status by excelling at betrayal and frontier espionage or by leading the Indians they had cleverly aroused against some settlers or soldiers" (Stedman, 1982, p. 201). The dangerous side of the multiracial's social position was especially perilous if the character could physically "pass" as Caucasian, allowing him or her to move undetected in and out of the White world (Pettit, 1980; Scheick, 1979). As stated by a Japanese villain in Wallace Irwin's "yellow peril" novel *Seed of the Sun* (1921/1979), "Even unto the tenth generation Japanese with blond skins and blue eyes will still be Japanese, quick with the one God-given virtue—loyalty to empire and the Emperor" (p. 233).

Today: The Sociopolitical Argument⁶

BICULTURALISM AND "BRIDGES"

In the last two to three decades, the "concerns" about multiracial people have once again shifted. It seems that the civil rights and Black power movements and the assertion and celebration of cultural and racial differences have been the turning point toward this latest development in the multiracial mythology. It is now more widely recognized that people of color (and some White ethnic groups) in the United States are all somewhat bicultural, and that this can be a very valuable and positive, rather than marginalizing, experience (Blauner, 1972; Steinberg, 1981). Thus contemporary studies of people of multiracial heritage tend to discuss "issues," both positive and negative, rather than focus on "problems" as in the past (Chang, 1974; Dien & Vinacke, 1964; Gibbs, 1987; Johnson & Nagoshi, 1986). There has even been some discussion of mixed-race people as the "children of the future"—the natural "bridges" between the artificial boundaries that divide the humans of the world.

SEPARATISM AND "SELLOUTS"

However, the last few decades have also made it clear to Americans that race is a political as well as a social, cultural, and biological grouping (Omi & Winant, 1986). Racial solidarity is now commonly identified as a means through which group, and thus individual, power can be obtained. In academia, the social science paradigm of "assimilation" has been rejected as both inaccurate and oppressive to non-"Anglos," especially to non-Whites (Blauner, 1972; Omi & Winant, 1986). Popular wisdom recognizes that the idea of America as the "melting pot" is outdated; scholars, administrators, and the media discuss alternative models for a nation of many racial and ethnic groups, such as "multiculturalism," "cultural pluralism," the "salad bowl," and "separatism."

Unfortunately for mixed-race people and their families, many of the new paradigms have made no more room for them and their experiences than have the paradigms of the past. In fact, one of the key factors in the assimilation model is "intermarriage," so the rejection of the model has often been expressed as a rejection of interracial

marriage, interracial families, and interracial people. People of color who marry Caucasians are often labeled "sellouts" and "traitors" by other non-Whites. Multiracial people who are part White are seen as inherently "whitewashed"; they are harassed for their light skin or light hair, their loyalty is always in question, and they are not allowed to discuss their multiraciality if they want to be included as legitimate "persons of color" (Furlong, 1968; Murphy-Shigematsu, 1988).

SUMMARY OF THE MULTIRACIAL MYTHOLOGY

In summary, monoracial Americans have crafted a mythological multiracial monster who is genetically, mentally, culturally, socially, and politically distorted. The old cliché, "What about the children?" is still the primary question posed to, or in many cases the primary condemnation aimed at, interracial couples in this country. In this way, multiracial people have been defined completely by others and, in the process, have internalized many of the images of themselves as torn and confused and as fitting in nowhere. This has encouraged them to adhere to the second strategy for dealing with multiracials: the denial of their existence.

The Denial of the Existence of Multiracial People

LEGAL DEFINITIONS AND HYPODESCENT

In the mid-1890s, an "octoroon" (one-eighth Black, seven-eighths White) named Homer Plessy was arrested after he was refused a seat on an all-White car by the conductor of the train on which he was riding. Plessy took the case to court, and, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the famous separate-but-equal case (Lofgren, 1987). Although the law was supposedly made to ensure the "equality" of Blacks and Whites, the very fact that a person who was seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth Black was automatically considered "Black" ensured racial inequality. Perhaps even more illogical than Plessy's being considered legally Black is the fact that he would have been considered Black in some states and White in others, as different states had different percentage rules (Lofgren, 1987).

As discussed earlier, U.S. society operates under a monoracial hegemonic culture in which race is seen as something solid and immutable. Multiracial people are constantly being shoved into one of the existing monoracial categories. Most of the time, it is the "most" subordinate of the multiracial person's racial groups that he or she is pushed into. This is described as "hypodescent," and it is the manner in which the superordinate racial group is kept clearly defined and in complete political, economic, and social power (Omi & Winant, 1986). The current standard rule that one-sixteenth to one-thirty-second "Black blood" makes a person legally African American, or the fact that anyone with as little as one-sixteenth "Japanese blood" was subject to being put into the U.S. internment camps during World War II, is indicative of hypodescent.

TREASURING RACIAL BOUNDARIES

But I think that it is more than just a desire to keep the White race "pure" and in power that advocates the denial that multiracial people exist in the United States. It seems that in this country, a great deal of people's lives is determined, or at least informed by, what racial group they belong to. Where they live, how they dress, who they vote for, what music they listen to, how they talk, what sports they play, what cigarettes they smoke—all are largely segregated by race. Of course, class, which is very much connected to race, plays a large role in this, but race is salient even outside of class. This is made evident when middle-class third- and fourth-generation Japanese Americans, wealthy immigrants from Taiwan, and welfare-dependent Southeast Asian refugees are grouped together—not only by non-Asian Americans, but by Asian Americans themselves (for instance, in the scholarly field of "Asian American studies" and in periodicals such as *Asian Week*).

In this way, people asserting their multiracial heritage confuse and threaten the boundaries that so comfortably mark people off from each other. It is not only the dominant White group that treasures these boundaries, but all racial and ethnic groups. (Although it seems that with groups that recognize their own multiracial background—for example, Filipinos, Chicanos, and certain Latino groups—the situation is quite a bit different.) The treasuring of clear boundaries is evident in the fact that multiracial African Americans are "allowed"

to be full members of the African American community, but only as long as they do not assert multiracial identities; and multiracial Asian Americans, especially when they are part Black, are generally considered "outsiders" and have very limited entrée into Asian American communities, except for those who have become respected or well known for some reason (the "claim-us-if-we're-famous" syndrome).

A very recent example of the denial of multiracial people's existence was the controversy over who should play the role of a Eurasian pimp in a Broadway musical. The musical's producer and directors cast a White actor; the Asian American community felt that the role should be played by an Asian American. Neither side ever mentioned the idea of searching for a person of mixed race to play the role.⁷

THE PRESSURE TO "CHOOSE"

So, in order to have a racial and ethnic group with which to belong, multiracial people have been pressured to "choose," on an individual level, which of their groups to belong to. The direction to "check one box only" extends far beyond the census form to just about every aspect of life (see Hall, Chapter 18, this volume). In many cases the "choice" is made for the person by society, based on his or her physical appearance. However, often a person does not coincide culturally with the monoracial group with which he or she has been placed based on appearance; his or her cultural experience may have been that of a person intimately exposed to multiple racial and ethnic groups and cultures (Williams, Chapter 20, this volume). For those multiracial people whose physical appearance leaves them racially ambiguous, questions about which group they identify with put them under constant pressure, especially when they feel that whoever is asking the question is looking for a particular answer.

Actually, the famous old story of "passing" that has so interested both White and Black writers is really just one version of the phenomenon of choosing (Daniel, Chapter 8, this volume). The ideology implicit in passing is hypodescent—that even if the person is genetically part White and looks physically White, as long as he or she has "one drop of Black blood," he or she is Black. In reality, if the character who passed as White had instead chosen to live in the Black community as a Black person, this would be just another version of passing (Spickard, 1989).

An interesting twist on the phenomenon of "choosing" occurs when a multiracial person chooses to be a different race or ethnicity altogether—for example, an Asian-White person who identifies as Hawaiian, Samoan, Native American, or Latino. And there are those who refuse to identify with any race, who publicly define themselves as "human" or as "Californian," for example. Of course, there are always those multiracial people who do not care to "fit in" with a racial group (or any group at all) and who relish their position as groupless.

PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC IDENTITY

Regardless of which group society tells a person he or she belongs to, and regardless of which group a person "chooses" to belong to publicly, a multiracial and multicultural person is essentially who he or she is—multiracial and multicultural. In this way, multiracial people often resist the oppressiveness of having to "choose" one of their groups by maintaining private identities and cultures that reflect their true racial and cultural combinations.

Conclusion

Multiracial people and interracial families are a threat to the "American way of life." The U.S. system has depended on very clear racial categories for its political, social, economic, and psychological organization. In an attempt to keep the categories well defined, two strategies have been employed: the creation of a negative mythology about people of mixed race and their families, using biological, sociocultural, and sociopolitical arguments; and the denial of the existence of people of mixed race and their families. As a result of this environment, which has offered no positive, viable option of being multiracial, it has been difficult for people of mixed race to accept and to assert a multiracial identity. Thus there has been little development of a group consciousness among multiracial people.

But this is changing. In the last decade, a movement has begun among people of multiracial and multiethnic descent, defining and asserting themselves through political and social activism, through scholarship and education, and through self-expression in the arts. In

doing this, multiracial people are challenging what this country has traditionally seen as being "race" and "ethnicity," "culture" and "community." By insisting that they exist and that they are what they are, multiracial and multiethnic people have blurred the boundaries between groups. Of course, this upsets a lot of people who depend on group boundaries for privilege or political or economic interest or sense of self, and it worries those who have static, undynamic ways of defining cultural and group pride and preservation. But in the end, less "us versus them" thinking—in this country and in this world—will be good for us all.

Notes

1. These are certainly not the only groups of people who have challenged these definitions. Feminists and feminist theorists have long been challenging definitions of *gender*, *sexuality*, and *family*, as well as *power* and *success*.

2. I am aware that there are distinct regional and ethnic differences within the United States regarding ideas about race. Hawaii does not seem to operate on the monoracial hegemony at all, and certain racial and ethnic groups in the United States, such as Filipinos, Chicanos, and other Latino groups, also seem not to see race as a concrete and immutable concept in the way that mainstream American society does.

3. The biological argument often gets merged with a theological argument in the sense that God and nature are commonly considered to be one and the same.

4. The Asian-White characters that commonly show up in American literature came later, as Asians did not start immigrating to the United States in large numbers until the 1860s. Multiracial characters of non-White mixes, such as Asian-Black, are rarely found in mainstream literature—a fact that is significant in itself.

5. This stereotype might very well be prevalent in other countries and cultures besides the United States and parts of Asia, but this is, as of yet, beyond the scope of my research.

6. The mythology of mixed-race people and their families has mainly been a creation of the dominant culture (i.e., the biological and sociocultural theories). However, in the last few decades people of color have also been active in publicly contributing to this ideology.

7. I have given a very brief and cursory description of the *Miss Saigon* controversy, which is actually very complex. For one thing, there have been accusations that the Eurasian character was originally written as a "full-blooded" Vietnamese but was changed to a Eurasian in order to allow a specific European actor to play the role. If this is the case, it is very disturbing to mixed-race people, as well as to people of color in general.

PART III

What of the Children?

**RACIALLY
MIXED
PEOPLE
IN
AMERICA**

**EDITED BY
Maria P. P. ROOT**



SAGE PUBLICATIONS
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Newbury Park London New Delhi