2 Dis/orienting Identities

Asian Americans, History, and Intercultural Communication

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If I'm not who you say I am, then you're not who you think you are.
—James Baldwin (1990, 5)

One morning while I was walking to the Mouton-Duvernet-Métro station in Paris’s 14th Arrondissement, where I was renting a room for the summer, a woman came running up to me in an obvious hurry. Out of breath, she blurted out, "Monsieur! Pardon! Où est le métro, s’il vous plaît?" I quickly gave her directions and she ran off, disappearing around the corner.

On my way to the Latin Quarter, I thought about how odd that little interaction had been for me. Here was a woman running up to me, assuming that I spoke French. I felt disoriented, as if I were called into a position that I do not normally occupy. When in Europe, I have come across many people who assume that, as someone of Asian ancestry, I speak French. Living in the United States, I rarely encounter people who assume that I speak French.

I begin with this story because I think it contributes to an understanding of the way that various histories influence intercultural communication practices. France’s history with Asia is different from that of other European nations and certainly from that of the United States. These varying histories position me in different ways in different cultural contexts. As an Asian American, my ties to France and French history are distant indeed; yet this past confronts me when, for example, Europeans assume I speak French. My goal in this paper is to explore the cultural and historical constructions of the “Orient” and its relationship to my communication experiences in both domestic and international contexts.

My hope is that this essay will help challenge assumptions that continue to hamper many communication interactions. If James Baldwin is correct, I want to encourage a rethinking of what “American” means as a nationality and as an identity. As Kim (1982) points out:

For Asian American writers, the task is to contribute to the total image and identity of America by depicting their own experiences and by defining their own humanity as part of the composite image of the American people. (22)

My goal here is not to argue simply that Asian Americans are Americans, but to suggest why this definition is a problem for Asian Americans. Unlike European Americans, Asian Americans have long been considered “forever foreign.”

I do not wish to confuse the already confusing difference(s) between “Asians” and “Asian Americans.” Yet, I believe it is important for Asian Americans to begin seeing their identities in both domestic and international contexts. For example:

Asian American Studies has been located within the context of American Studies and stripped of its international links. This nationalist interpretation of immigration history has also been a more comfortable discourse for second- and third-generation Americans of Asian ancestry. Tired of being thought of as foreigners, these scholars have been particularly reluctant to identify with Asian Studies and its pronouncements on the distinctiveness of Asian cultures in counterpoint to Euro-American culture. (Mazumdar 1991, 29–30)

My point is not to reinforce this binary view of “Euro-American culture” versus “Asian cultures” in which Asian Americans
are invisible, marginalized, and silenced. Rather, I want to suggest that we cannot understand the experiences and histories of Asian Americans outside of the context of both domestic and international contexts.

It is not enough simply to mark the difference between "Asian" and "Asian American." Asian Americans, like Asians, are diverse groups of people that can be categorized under the same discursive label. The cultural backgrounds and histories of Americans of Asian ancestry are at least as diverse as Americans of European ancestry, if not more so. It is important, therefore, to recognize the heterogeneity concealed in the construction of Asian American identity since an essentialized ethnic identity also inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies we are "all alike" and conform to "types." (Lowe 1991, 30)

The cultural and discursive construction of "Asian American," then, is certainly inadequate to describe the diversity and complexity of the differences between and among us, but it does help us understand how "Orientals" are often categorized as "Other" in U.S. culture, due to histories of discrimination.

The Specter of the 'Orient'

As yonsei, a fourth-generation Japanese American, I feel at home in the United States. Like many Americans of European ancestry who have not been to Europe, I have not yet visited Japan. While I would like to visit Japan, the reality of Japan is not part of my experience. Certainly, I have been influenced by Japanese culture, filtered down through the generations and experiences of my forbears in the United States. Like many U.S. citizens whose ancestors came from overseas, my relation to "Orient" is similar to those who trace origins elsewhere.

Here is a specter haunting the United States: the specter of the Orient. The cultural image of the Orient invades and structures much of my intercultural communication interactions. My physical features identify my Asian ancestry, and it is this identification that structures my communication interactions with others. The phenomenon of being a U.S. citizen without European ancestry is noted by Chan (1991):

The history of Asians in America can be fully understood only if we regard them as both immigrants and members of nonwhite minority groups. As immigrants, many of their struggles resemble those that European immigrants have faced, but as people of nonwhite origins bearing distinct physical differences, they have been perceived as "perpetual foreigners" who can never be completely absorbed into American society and its body politic. (187)

The question here is one of identity: Who am I perceived to be when I communicate with others? What does it mean to be a "perpetual foreigner" in one's native country? My identity is very much tied to the ways in which others speak to me and the ways in which society represents my interests. In order to begin to answer these questions, we have to understand the complexity of the cultural construction of the Orient.

It is the cultural construction of the Orient that many Asians and Asian Americans find negative. Therefore, the term oriental is not the preferred term; it is fraught with stigmatizing ideological meanings. The use of oriental to refer to people, then, should also be avoided.

Where Is the Orient?

We can sense the ideological framework that produces the cultural construction of the Orient when we juxtapose European with American visions of this imaginary place. Europeans tend to think of the Near East (Turkey) and the Middle East when they speak of the Orient. However, as Said (1978) pointed out,

Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very
differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly). (1)

The Orient is not a place with clearly defined boundaries in the way that nations or even continents are demarcated. The Orient crosses continents "from North Africa and Turkey to China and Japan" (Thomas 1990, 6).

But what do Turkey and Japan share that Italy and Japan do not? How is North Africa like China, but not like France? These are more than analogy questions; they point to an odd system of categorizing, of ordering the world through a discourse in which the Orient becomes the Other, the antithesis of the West. This binary opposition between the Occident and the Orient is reflected in U.S. culture as well.

The cultural construction of the Orient is evident in the innumerable films, television and radio programs, advertisements, and cartoons that depict this "Other" place. This exotic place is occupied by odd people, as evidenced by their bizarre clothes, eyes, and the sounds emanating from "Orientals." This is not a new discovery, as "caricatures of Asians have been part of American popular culture for generations" (Kim 1981, 3).

Even when I was young, I hated seeing media and movie images of martial arts, Fu Manchu types, and other limited and distorted representations of Asians. I longed for images of Asian Americans, rather than Asians. Yet the creation of Asian American images might have upset the binary opposition between East and West. I often wonder if we still need this oppositional force in our culture, but as I watch "Japan-bashing" on television, its continuation seems assured.

How to Become Dis/oriented

Dis/orientation is a dialectical process. The first part of this process, that of Asian Americans, comprises the historical experiences of Asian Americans living in the United States. The second part, that of non-Asian Americans, is the socially learned expectation that Asians are not American, and can never become Americans. The combination of these processes invariably constructs identity positions that rarely correspond to where we, Asian Americans, think we are; hence, we are left dis/oriented.

In order to be dis/oriented, it seems necessary that Asian Americans had to first be "oriented." The historical process by which dis/orientation happens may take several generations, but the specific time frame seems to matter little. In my family, dis/orientation began in the nineteenth century and continues today. It is part of a long struggle to distance oneself from the cultural construction of the Orient.

Obviously, there were tremendous influences that caused a split from cultures, rather than a combination thereof. My mother's family, for example, switched from being a primarily Japanese-speaking household to an English-speaking one during their internment in a U.S. concentration camp during World War II. I think they felt it was better to demonstrate their commitment to the United States during a time of crisis in which, based on their ancestry, their loyalty was questioned. This historical experience has been one of the most influential aspects of Japanese American identity, a shared collective memory that has bound Japanese Americans as a group and created a distinct identity. In this way, the collective memory serves an important identity function (Ng 1991). In fact, it is this historical experience that creates my need to insist that I am American, not Japanese.

For non-Asian Americans, dis/orientation is not a split from the Orient, but the disorienting inability to overcome "Orientalism." I suspect that Orientalism manifests itself in different ways in intercultural communication interactions, but it becomes problematic when distinctions between Asian and Asian Americans are not made, when English is assumed a foreign language for Asian Americans, when Asian and American are split into two unrelated terms.

Reconsidering History

"Do you speak English?" This question always dis/orients me; I am lost when asked this question. Why wouldn't I speak the language of my parents, the language of my
country? The simple response “Of course I do” does not usually dis/orient the questioner’s assumption that one needs European ancestors to be “American.”

I once had a Vietnamese American student whose francophone parents wanted her to learn French. She steadfastly refused, saying, “French is the language of the colonizers.” History has situated her relationship to French quite differently from my own. The other students in class objected, insisting that “French is a beautiful language.” Once I had explained a little about the history of France in Indochina, they understood her resistance.

History is a process that has constructed where and how we enter into dialogue, conversation, and communication. It has strongly influenced what languages we speak, how we are perceived and how we perceive ourselves, and what domestic and international conflicts affect us.

On the domestic level, the histories of Asians in the United States are often difficult to find. Ignorance of these histories leads many Americans to assume that Asian Americans are recent immigrants. Although many Asian Americans trace their roots back before the tremendous wave of European immigration in the early twentieth century, our histories are hidden and silenced. We know that

the major immigrant groups in the United States in the nineteenth century were the Chinese and Japanese, although there is evidence that Filipinos, for example, had been in Louisiana as early as the eighteenth century. (Odo 1993, 118–119)

Yet, the experiences of Asian Americans in many regions of the United States are often overlooked, hence, “much of our [Asian American] social and cultural histories will never be recovered” (Odo 1993, 120). On the international level, the dynamic nature of international relations between Asian nations and the United States continues to influence the ways in which Asian Americans are seen. For example:

Over 50 years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans are again victims of rising tensions between Japan and the United States. This should come as no surprise. The fate of Asian Americans has always been historically shaped by the prevailing state of United States-Asia relations. (Omi 1993, 208)

The shifting winds of international relations have driven Asian Americans in many directions in their continual struggles to find a place in the United States. But these international relations are not limited to the United States and Asia; they encompass many international interactions, contemporary as well as historical, in which we find ourselves trapped.

While waiting for the RER train at the Luxembourg station in Paris, I stood on the platform near a group of European American tourists who were examining a map and discussing where to go next. One of the women looked around and complained to her friends, in English, that there were “too many foreigners in Paris.” As an American in France, the comment did not strike me until I realized that the tourist assumed that I did not speak English and felt that she had some claim to France that I did not, as I assume she was not complaining about herself. I have wondered from time to time about the nature of her comment. Did she expect a different Paris? Did she know about our shared history on the other side of the Atlantic? Did she know about France’s history in Africa and Asia? Would such knowledge have helped her understand France in other ways?

Our many different histories have much to do with where and how we enter into communication. The complexity of these histories can seem daunting, but they are crucial to the study of intercultural communication. Perhaps it is the absence of historical understanding that is no longer tenable if we are serious about understanding intercultural communication.

Another Country?

I do not know the face of this country.

It is inhabited by strangers who call me obscene names.
Jap. Go home.  
Where is home?  
—Janice Mirikitani (1987, 7)

When I was growing up in Georgia, I began first grade at a “white school.” At the time, I do not think I understood why there were two types of schools or any of the other racially segregated practices we engaged in daily. In hindsight, it seems bizarre to have lived in a black and white world when one is neither black nor white. How arbitrary these divisions are! Yet, they construct the ways in which we think about ourselves and others. Even today, when I speak to my students about history and intercultural relations, they look at me as if I am from another country.

Today, I live in central Arizona. Fifty years ago my mother also lived in Arizona, at Poston III, an internment camp. Although we might like to believe that being an American is not a matter of “a common nationality, language, race, or ancestry” (Lapham 1992, 48), the historical divisiveness of these differences and their importance in our everyday understanding of ourselves and others belies this dream.

Because of the inability of many European Americans to perceive any difference—cultural, linguistic, national, etc.—between Asians and Asian Americans, I can only be wary of recent Japan-bashing in the U.S. media. Although it has been 50 years since the U.S. concentration camps opened, it was because of similar racism that the mass incarceration of U.S. citizens was initiated. Here, then, is the irony: Asian American identities cannot be understood outside of the context of international politics and histories, and Asian American history and politics are a part of U.S. history and politics. Hence, my identification as an “American” seems ineffectual and, I feel, is an ongoing struggle with those who wish to identify me otherwise. These dis/orienting identities always leave me somewhere other than where I think I am. Asian Americans are trapped among larger discourses and histories, which constantly disrupt any claim to a stable identity; perhaps we are a paradigmatic example of postmodern racial identity.

I resent being considered a foreigner in the United States, asked if I speak English, or asked when I came to this country. I am angry that my family has lost what I consider to be the most important part of its cultural heritage: its language. Perhaps this is the price to be paid for living in a society that is more interested in acculturation to “the hegemonic values of white U.S. society” (Escoffier 1991, 64) than to multiculturalism. My hope is that Asian Americans will be able to inscribe their experiences and histories into other groups through “the formation of important political alliances and affiliations... across racial and ethnic, gender, sexuality, and class lines” (Lowe 1991, 31). In large part, this strategy would require letting go of the dominant view of U.S. history as one of European conquest and the assumption that Americans are of European descent.

Unlike James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and many other African American expatriates, I did not find Paris as liberating as they did. They lived in a different Paris, in a different context than I did. They also came from a different United States. As much as I enjoyed Paris, it was not home.

When the Arizona desert heat becomes oppressive, I think of my mother living in a tar-paper barrack without air conditioning. I doubt that she considered Arizona “home.” For me, however, I am home far from Georgia. This is my country and my home, even if I do not look “all-American.”

Endnotes
1. “Excuse me, sir, where is the Metro station?”

References
Names, Narratives, and the Evolution of Ethnic Identity

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When being an “American” does not yield empowerment and acceptance, marginalized groups look for labels around which to proclaim identity and rally for political and communal purposes. The emergent theory of ethnic identity proposed by sociologist Felix Padilla in *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985) suggests that ethnic identity is adaptive and evolving. It adjusts to the institutional and structural forces of the dominant culture. In the process, ethnic identity evolves in several ways. There is ethnic identity based on symbolic themes such as a common language, rituals, or shared world views. There is ethnic identification as historical consciousness, a sequence of events and struggles over time that reflects continuity from past to future. There is also ethnic identity as social consciousness, a seeking after communal or group acceptance. Finally, there is ethnic identity as strategy, a way of gaining political voice. Padilla’s focus is on the evolution of communal ethnic identity, but individuals also go through a similar process in understanding and coming to terms with their ethnic identity.

The individual process may be understood by examining the different terms or names persons use to identify themselves over the course of their lives. Each “name” is a rhetorical device insofar as it communicates a particular story. Walter Fisher’s (1987) narrative paradigm suggests that every person has life experiences that become his/her own “story.” According to Fisher, these experiences are biographical, cultural, historical, and moral, and they define the efforts of reasoning and valuing beings to conduct their lives in some semblance of order. Padilla’s definition of ethnic identity and Fisher’s focus on the narratives of our lives come together to help us understand the rhetorical impact of names placed on individuals and groups by themselves and by others. These names are “not merely a dilemma of self-identity, but of self-in-group-identity” (Rendon 1971, 324). In this essay, I will trace the unfolding of my own ethnic identity from Spanish to Mexican American, to Latina, and to Chicana by briefly examining the story behind each name. I will also address the value of, indeed the necessity for, multiple names.

Unfolding Ethnic Identity

Over the course of my life one question has been consistently asked of me: *What are you?* I used to reply that I was American, but it quickly became clear this was unacceptable because what came next was, “No, really, what are you?” In my more perverse moments I responded, “I am human.” I stopped when I realized people’s feelings were hurt. Ironic? Yes, but the motive behind the question often justified hurt feelings. I became aware of this only after asking a question of my own: “Why do you ask?”

The answers sometimes astounded me and almost always saddened me. I was astonished by outright hostility based on the assumption that I am where I am today because of “an easy affirmative-action ride.” My sadness resulted from a growing knowledge of the desperate need of students who timidly ask, “What are you?” in the hopes of finding a role model. The combined result of my responses to “What are you?” and others’ responses to “Why do you ask?” has been an enlightenment. Confronting the motives of people has forced me to examine
who I am. In the process I have had to critically examine my own choices, in different times and contexts, of the names by which I am "placed" in society. The names are "Spanish," "Mexican American," "Latina," and "Chicana."

'I Am Spanish' (1)

Behind this label is the story of my childhood in northern New Mexico where I was born and raised. New Mexico was the first permanent Spanish settlement in the Southwest, and New Mexicans have characterized themselves as Spanish for centuries. My parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents considered themselves Spanish; wrongly or rightly, they attributed their customs, habits, and language to their Spanish heritage, and I followed suit. In Fisher's terms, this was the biographical aspect of my life story. From Padilla's perspective, this would be considered ethnic identity based on symbolic themes such as rituals and practices. The rituals and practices included covering paths with flower petals for religious processions, speaking Spanish with some regional peculiarities, and listening to the religious ballads of the Penitentes. We never talked about whether we were really Spanish. Only in later years did I hear the argument that the intermarriage of Spaniards with Indians invalidated the use of the name "Spanish." Its continued use, according to Mario Garcia (1989, 281), communicates the idea that "racially and culturally they [New Mexicans] had to do more with Spain than with Mexico;" therefore, to be Spanish is to consider oneself "racially pure" or an "anglicized Mexican American." Garcia's argument may or may not be valid, but, in my young mind, the story of being Spanish did not include concepts of racial purity or assimilation; what it did do was allow me to begin my life with a clearly defined identity and a place in the world. For me, the story of being Spanish incorporates into its plot the innocence of youth, before the reality of discrimination became an inherent part of the knowledge of who I am.

'I Am Mexican American'

When I left New Mexico, my sense of belonging did not follow me across the state border. When I responded to the question "What are you?" by saying, "I am Spanish," people corrected me: "You mean Mexican, don't you?" My initial reaction was anger; how could they know better than I who I was? But soon my reaction was one of puzzlement, and I wondered just why there was such insistence that I be Mexican. Reading and studying led me to understand that the difference between Spanish and Mexican American could be found in the legacy of colonization. Mirandé and Enriquez (1979) make a distinction between the "internal" colonization of the Southwest and the "classic" colonization of Mexico. A central consequence of internal colonization is that "natives are deprived from power and native institutions are completely destroyed" (9). There is no formal or legal existence; it is as if the natives are re-invented in the conqueror's image. Therefore, behind the name "Spanish" is the story of internal colonization that does not allow for prior existence.

On the other hand, classic colonization "allows for more continuity between the pre- and post-conquest societies" because "native institutions are modified but retained," allowing formal and legal existence of the natives (9). Thus, behind the name "Mexican American" is the story of classic colonization that allows for prior existence and that also communicates duality. The name itself signifies duality; we are, as Richard A. Garcia (1983) argues, "Mexican in culture and social activity, American in philosophy and politics (88)." As native-born Americans, we also have a dual historical consciousness—the history of America and the history before America—that we must weave into the narrative of our lives to create a collective "biography." We have dual visions: the achievement of the American Dream and the preservation of cultural identity. To be Mexican American means "navigating" precariously between both worlds, inhabiting both in good faith,
and finally... forging a span between... original Mexican and... acquired American enculturations. (Saldívar 1990:168)

'I Am Latina' [3]

If the story behind the name Mexican American is grounded in duality, the story behind the name "Latina" is grounded in cultural connectedness. The Spaniards proclaimed vast territories of North and South America as their own. They intermarried in all the regions in which they settled. These marriages yielded offspring who named themselves variously as Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Mexicans, and so forth, but they connect culturally with one another when they name each other Latinas.

Renato Rosaldo (1989) argues that culture encompasses "the informal practices of everyday life" (26). One of the most fundamental practices that unites those belonging to the Latino culture is religion, probably because Catholicism was another Spanish legacy. The Virgin Mary is appealed to in the course of daily living; the title by which she is known changes, but her importance is never questioned. For example, she is La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico, Nuestra Señora de la Credad del Cobre in Cuba, La Virgen de la Macarena in Colombia, and La Conquistadora in New Mexico. She symbolizes the deep spirituality that is a definitive characteristic of the Latino culture. To use the name Latina is to communicate acceptance and belonging in a broad cultural community. This is ethnic identity as a type of consciousness that addresses the cultural aspect of Fisher's conception of the life story.

'I Am Chicana' [4]

This name suggests a smaller community, a special kind of Mexican American awareness that does not invoke others (Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc.). In Chicano Manifesto, Armando Rendon (1971, 320) argues that "to be Chicano[a] means that a person has looked deeper into his [her] being." To appropriate the name for oneself signifies the most intense ethnic identity, because, as Arnulfo Trejo (1979, xvii) suggests, "Chicano/a" is "the only term that was especially selected by us, for us." Padilla would define this ethnic identity as a strategy, and he would be right; the name was the primary political as well as rhetorical strategy of the Chicano movement of the 1960s. Mirandé and Enríquez (1979, 12) argue that a dominant characteristic of the name "Chicana" is that it admits a "sense of marginality." There is a political tone and character to "Chicana" that signifies a story of self-determination and empowerment. As such, the name denotes a kind of political becoming. At the same time, however, the name communicates the idea of being American, not in a "melting pot" sense that presupposes assimilation, but rather in a pluralistic sense that acknowledges the inalienable right of existence for different peoples (Trejo 1979).

The Worth of Multiple Names [6]

What, then, am I? The truth is that I am all of these. Each name reveals a different facet of identity that allows symbolic, historical, cultural, and political connectedness. These names are no different than other multiple labels we take on. For example, to be mother, wife, sister, and daughter is to admit to the complexity of being female. Each name implies a narrative of experiences gained in responding to circumstance, time, and place and motivated by a need to belong. As such they possess great rhetorical force. So it is with the names Spanish, Mexican American, Latina, and Chicana. They reveal facets of complex cultural beings. In my case, I resort to being Spanish and all it implies whenever I return to my birthplace, in much the same way that we often resort to being children again in the presence of our parents. But I am also Mexican American when I balance the two important cultures that define me; Latina, when I wish to emphasize cultural and historical connectedness with others; and Chicana, whenever opportunities arise to promote political empowerment and assert cultural pride.
It is sometimes difficult for people to understand the "both/and" mentality that results from this simultaneity of existence. In *To Split a Human*, Carmen Tafolla (1985) traces the theme of duality that gave rise to the both/and mentality. Beginning with pre-Columbian civilizations, the mythic polarities of life/death, half male/half female, and the Mother/Father god represented dual natures. In contemporary times, this duality manifests itself rhetorically as "otherness," which Alberto González (1990, 276) defines as "expressions of the [Mexican American] cultural identity . . . that includes simultaneous themes of separation and desire for inclusion." While some may lament this duality, Tafolla finds joy in it. Chicana women expressed to Tafolla their feelings about living in the midst of two cultures: "What is most exciting . . . is the constant thought in my mind that I am actually two"; "Being bilingual and bicultural has sensitized me. . . . I can then live intensely and not merely exist";

There are several words that we can use to describe a feeling, thing, etc. that cannot be translated into English . . . and some that cannot be translated into Spanish. We have both. (93–94)

We are indeed enriched by belonging to two cultures. We are made richer still by having at our disposal several names by which to identify ourselves. Singly, the names Spanish, Mexican American, Latina, and Chicana communicate part of a life story. Together they weave a rhetorically powerful narrative of ethnic identity that combines biographical, historical, cultural, and political experiences.

Endnote

1. *Name* is the term I use to describe the confluence of historical, cultural, biographical, political, and symbolic themes that express membership in a particular group.

References


As a communication researcher I have had many "defining moments" that have helped me to better understand my scholastic and research goals. It is through research projects and studies that I have become aware of how deeply embedded the issues of racial and cultural identity are in my personal life. When people ask me about the impetus behind my dissertation on interracial dating, I can not speak from the standpoint of one who has been in such a relationship. Yet my life circumstances are at a point where such a relationship could become a possibility, given my predominantly Euro-American environment.

Other life events have helped me to understand my interests in the areas of interracial communication, interracial romantic relationships, and biracial identity, originating with my family when we lived in Spain and continuing from recent knowledge I had acquired about my family lineage.

A short time ago I returned home to Atlanta, Georgia, for a ceremony performed at the church where my father has been the pastor for 18 years. The church was renaming the street in honor of my great-grandfather, David Franklin "Papa" Fuller. It also was dedicating a beautiful portrait of Papa to commemorate his invaluable contributions during his tenure as pastor. Although I never met Papa and only know of him through the oral history of my grandmother's and father's stories, this dedication made me realize the richness of my family heritage through the experiences of slavery, freedom, religion, and sense of family commitment.

My great-grandfather was the product of a relationship between a prominent Euro-American man in the community and an African American woman of Native American descent. Papa's biological father never publicly acknowledged him as his son. However, he made sure that Papa's financial needs were met through gifts of land, money, clothes, and other things that symbolized an unspoken connection between them. Although his cultural identity was rarely spoken of, Papa was taught to love and value his heritage and pass that appreciation on to his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It is this part of my multicultural background—African American, Euro-American, and Native American—that forms the collective approach which I use to embrace those who are culturally, racially, and ethically different from me. When I look at them, I see parts of myself that have yet to be discovered.

Given my family history and physical features, there is little or no hint of my multicultural identity. I am short, have medium brown skin tone with orange undertones, short kinky hair, and almond-shaped brown eyes. These distinct features have allowed me the privilege of being an African American.

American society uses a dichotomous approach to cultural diversity. On the one hand, diversity is appreciated and promoted; on the other, it stifles socio-economic advancement, ignites racist and prejudiced behavior, and creates instances of isolation in social situations. Such experiences often breed feelings of loneliness, anger, bitterness, resentment, and even self-loathing, all of which benefit only the dominant culture. People of the minority are alienated just for being who they are.

The concepts of race and culture are symbolically structured to create meaning. Culture involves the shared meaning of symbols, values, beliefs, and rituals within a
certain group. Conversely, Europeans invented the notion of race for the sole purpose of colonizing, enslave, and oppressing "others" of different physical characteristics, such as skin color and facial features. Because of such categorizations, individuals today are pressured by society to ascribe to various ethnic or racial groups simply to survive.

As evidenced in newspaper reports and television news stories, certain social incidents frequently contribute to the development or stagnation of one's biracial or multicultural identity. Recently, for example, an Alabama principal threatened to ban all interracial couples from attending his school's prom (Lindsay 1994; Walsh 1994). When a biracial student questioned this, Principal Humphries replied that her parents had made a mistake (by conceiving her) and that he did not want to see others do the same. In the end, the principal was suspended, but this incident illustrates how those in positions of authority can cause destruction and havoc just by the words they utter—denouncing instead of celebrating diversity and biracial or bicultural identity.

As perceived by this principal and others like him, such "racial ambiguity" cannot be tolerated (Cose 1995). Because we live in a society obsessed with racial categorization, the "dilemma" of biracial and bicultural identity has angered many people. Rather than viewing biracial and bicultural identity as the fusion of two cultures with different qualities, they perceive it as an individual's choice of one race or culture over another.

The purpose of this essay is to explore two communication phenomena that aptly capture the experiences of biracial and bicultural people and their search for identity within a racially and culturally oppressive society. After conducting interviews with two self-identified bicultural individuals and evaluating research on how biracial men and women develop their racial or cultural identities (Funderburg 1994), I found evidence of two primary internal processes that may be experienced: static cultural identity and fluid cultural identity.

A static cultural identity may be described as a person's choice to identify with one or both cultures or races in all contexts and interactions. For example, such a person will identify himself or herself solely as African American, Euro-American, Latino, biracial, or bicultural. Throughout his or her life, that person's identity remains constant with a strong identification with a specific racial or cultural persona.

A fluid cultural identity is one whereby the person's choice of identity is context-specific and influenced by social situations and interpersonal interactions. In such instances, that person identifies with his or her cultural identity for one of two reasons: (1) to acknowledge his or her varied cultural heritage when certain concerns are central to one's being or (2) to "play the race/culture card" for unethical or manipulative purposes. Although the interviewees for this essay indicated that playing the race card was not a motivating factor in their cultural identification process, the manipulative use of one's race was noted by some subjects in Funderburg's study (1994). Unlike static cultural identity, fluid cultural identity is heavily influenced by an individual's freedom to choose the culture to which he or she most closely identifies.

This essay will explore the cultural phenomena of biracial identity as either static or fluid. Although one type of cultural identity is no more favorable than the other, each is presented as a means to understand how identity is defined by and developed within individuals from multicultural backgrounds. We will consider real-life experiences and accounts where such factors as family, friends, society, and personal experiences have greatly influenced a biracial person's decision to maintain either a static or fluid cultural identity.

Feelings of Cultural Duality

Cultural duality is a common and quite apparent phenomenon. For the thousands of people like me who come from a multiracial background but whose features do not reveal such a lineage, a search for a cultural identity can be a lifelong and tumultuous
.parents and family

The role of a parent entails the responsibility of fulfilling the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental needs of one’s children. The biological relationship between a parent and child is unchangeable, but it is the involvement and commitment of the parent that will ensure the child’s emotional well-being. Although this obligation is difficult by itself, the merging of two culturally different parents adds another dimension to the role of being a true parent. In a bicultural home it is the responsibility of one or both parents to take an active role in educating their children about the cultures and survival in a society preoccupied with categorizing race, ethnicity, and culture.

One parent who experienced a great deal of internal conflict over his obligation to his daughter and her knowledge of their Japanese ancestry was David Mura (1992). In an essay published in Mother Jones, Mura shares his experiences of an interracial marriage with a Euro-American and his firm desire for his daughter to possess a strong static cultural identity in both cultures. Mura believes that ultimately she will decide how to define herself—as Japanese, Japanese American, or any other label that she feels accurately defines who she is. His wife takes a more active role in educating their daughter about her biracial heritage, and Mura admits he harbors feelings of shame and guilt bred into him by his low self-esteem and lack of cultural pride as a young adult—a form of cultural amnesia that had robbed him of his opportunity to discover Japanese language, culture, and history. The dominant culture has formed who he is, stripping away his multidimensional identity and creating one that is acceptable in its eyes only. Mura yearns for his daughter to learn about both his and his wife’s cultural backgrounds and to embrace them both without placing greater importance on one over the other.

One person who shared with me the pains and joys associated with the development of identity and the significance of the parent’s role was “Dana,” a 22-year-old Mexican American woman who was interviewed for this essay. When asked how her divorced parents educated her about her Mexican and Irish-Catholic cultures, Dana explained that her mother, with whom she had lived in Florida until she was 13 years old, never really tried to teach her about her heritage. Instead, she instructed her to be a good person who has been extracted from all cultures. Although Dana was aware of her Mexican heritage, her environment encouraged her to present herself as a Euro-American like her school and neighborhood peers. Dana upheld a strong static cultural identity as a Euro-American female until she moved to Detroit to live with her Mexican father. There she came to really understand and appreciate all that her culture had to offer—new ways of dress, food, language, and a true sense of family. Due to her new environment, her cultural identity underwent the transition from static to fluid. Her father took an active role in educating her about her Mexican culture. As a result, Dana has now come to identify herself as fully Mexican American.

Dana’s cultural identity remains static due to her desire to maintain a constant self-definition. Although her identity in her
young years was more influenced by social interactions and her peers. Dana has now made a conscious effort to claim her biracial identity despite the negative consequences. Although she has olive-colored skin, dark brown hair, and hazel eyes, her physical features are not what defines who she is—she defines who she is. When asked how she would educate her future biracial children, Dana said she would definitely have an active role in educating them about her and her spouse’s heritages. While she does not fault her mother for failing to foster her cultural identity in her childhood, Dana is more appreciative of her father’s commitment to educate her about the Mexican heritage from which she was sheltered for the first half of her life.

A similar interviewee was Jimmy, a Mexican American male whose father is Mexican and whose mother is Euro-American. Jimmy’s parents were divorced as well and neither tried to educate him about his distinctly different heritages. Although his physical appearance does not reveal his dual ethnicity, Jimmy’s surname quickly relays to others that he hails from an interracial household. Much like Dana, Jimmy experienced fluid cultural identity for most of his youth and had a limited knowledge of who he was or from where he had come. Not until he entered college did he begin to develop his bicultural identity.

Jimmy has tried to learn more about his Mexican heritage. He and his Euro-American wife take an active role in their daughter’s life by giving her some exposure to his culture, but Jimmy believes there are other elements of her self that are just as important. From this evidence Jimmy appears to have a fluid cultural identity that embodies the many dimensions of his culture as influenced by social interactions and interpersonal relationships. Although he identifies himself as Mexican American, he only acknowledges his cultural heritage when certain concerns are central to his definition of self or when others are engaged in unethical intercultural communication. For example, Jimmy noted that in the past he has had to confront an associate or friend for using language that he deemed offensive to Mexicans. Although he is not consumed by his cultural identity, he knows there is more than one way to define oneself culturally without denying one’s identity.

Dana, on the other hand, said she would go to great lengths to teach her children about their multiethnic background. Certain childhood experiences, during which her cousins called her “spic” and “wetback,” crystallized her role as a future parent. She believes that her cousins must have been taught by their parents to use such derogatory words to demean those who are culturally different from them.

The experiences of Dana and Jimmy effectively illustrate how crucial the discursive role of the parent is in developing a sense of self, especially when the child is the product of a cross-cultural union. Whether parents choose to take an active or passive role in molding a child’s identity, it is important that they teach their children the beauty and distinctiveness of their respective cultures and heritages. If this is not done, feelings of cultural amnesia could ultimately manifest in the hearts of many young bicultural Americans.

Another factor that contributes to the development of a static or fluid cultural identity is the role of family members other than the parents. In her personal essay, Kathleen Cross (1990) describes the emotional turmoil she experienced growing up as the product of an interracial marriage. By all appearances, Cross looks like a Euro-American female. Her features almost conceal her African American heritage, but her very being communicates a persona contrary to the naked eye. Cross is an expert on how different family members can influence how one defines oneself in a society preoccupied with race. As the title of her article—Trapped in the Body of a White Woman—suggests, both skin color and cultural issues are more obvious obstacles that bicultural people must overcome on a day-to-day basis.

According to Cross, she “embraces [her] African Americaness without appearing to be at odds with the European in [her],” although she has been accused of “denying
In his personal essay in *Newsweek*, Brian Courtney (1995) personifies the internal identity struggle that biracial individuals like himself must endure. He was taught by his African American father and Euro-American mother to be proud of who he is *because* of his two cultures and who he is as a person. In this case his struggle has not been between his parents’ roles in his cultural education but between his two groups of African American and Euro-American friends. When he is with either one, behavioral expectations force him to reflect the race of the group whose company he keeps. His African American friends accuse him of “acting white” and thinking he is better than they because he is “only half black.” On the other hand, Brian’s Euro-American friends want him to ascribe to dress codes and behaviors that are blatantly scrutinized by his African American peers. This self-described “never-ending tug of war” has only solidified Brian’s belief that America must identify biracial individuals for the distinct group they are, neither one nor the other but a combination of the two. Brian’s argument for a static cultural identity further exemplifies the internal duality that a biracial person experiences within interpersonal interactions.

In their qualitative study of biracial identity among children, Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, and Harris (1993) found that older subjects felt that the friendships they developed were the direct result of their primary racial identification. They identified themselves as Euro-American when they associated with their Euro-American peers and vice versa with those who identified themselves as African American. Like Dana and Brian, their social networks have forced them to adopt a static cultural identity to sustain a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, such a decision is made for the sake of others rather than for one’s own self-evolution.

**Where Do We Go From Here?**

As evidenced by the previous accounts, individuals who are culturally diverse by birth and racial or cultural identity—as we
all are—are often pressured to choose one culture over another. They can be educated by their parents and members of their community to embrace both cultures while simultaneously identifying with their biracial community. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. So what must be done to celebrate this unique state of cultural diversity?

Journalist Bechetta Jackson (1995) argues that parents must try to educate their own children about their heritages, particularly when the issue of transracial adoption has to be addressed. How can parents from one culture educate their adopted children about their culture if it is not a part of their lived experience? In a case involving a Euro-American couple planning to adopt two African American boys, the parents stated that they are

committed to doing everything they can to raise the children with knowledge about who they are and where they come from. . . . They need to know who they are. (Jackson 1995)

The couple attends a predominantly African American church, lives in a multiracial community, and has frequent interactions with both their African American and Euro-American friends. This would seem to be an ideal environment to foster a healthy cultural identity within the boys. Yet, however their cultural identity is shaped by their adoptive parents, they will ultimately have to construct their own identity as they mature into adulthood.

Conclusion

The issue of racial and cultural identity for biracial and bicultural people is a constant internal battle which forces them to either reject or accept certain parts of their entire being. It is through static or fluid cultural identity that a person can truly experience self-definition, understanding, and appreciation of who they are. Although neither form of self-definition is healthier than the other, it is the freedom of choice that allows individuals to determine their own cultural identity. Static cultural identity and fluid cultural identity are communica-

tion phenomena reflecting the developmental processes that biracial individuals experience in an attempt to define themselves for themselves. Whether their identity is constant or influenced by social situations and interpersonal interactions with family, friends, and society, it is inevitably an individual choice.

American society needs to learn to acknowledge, respect, and celebrate cultural diversity through cultural identity. Public policy has mandated integration in the workplace, classrooms, restaurants, and other public domains, but what about our interpersonal relationships? Will society as a whole ever look beyond the pigmentation of one’s skin to deem one as worthy? Presently, the answer is a sad, resounding “no.” However, the remedy must not be one of acceptance but one of determination, celebration, and jubilation.

Until this comes to pass, it is the right and responsibility of parents and biracial children, as well as children from same-race unions, to become more educated about the heritages that have produced a myriad of beautiful people who have made valuable contributions to their communities, society, and the world. If we look at the surface of their skin, we see a people with rituals, experiences, and wisdom different from our own. If we look beneath their skin, we will find intelligence, spirituality, beauty, soul, determination, and peace.

Come celebrate your diversity. Although we all take different paths in life, who is to say that our ancestors never shared the same road we travel? When we look at each other, do we see reflections of ourselves or what we are going to be? Whether our cultural identities are static or fluid, it is only through our cultural histories that these questions can be answered.

References


Struggling for Identity: Multiethnic and Biracial Individuals in America

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While I was teaching a sophomore-level interpersonal communication course, in the midst of class discussion, one of my students interrupted me in mid-sentence and called out, "What are you?!" And as if to respond to my quizzical look, she immediately retorted, "You know what I mean, WHAT ARE YOU?!"

I replied without fanfare, "My family looks like a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, with every ethnicity represented." She remained after class, asking for further explanation of what I meant. As a multiracial person, my unfamiliar variances in physical features defy immediate ethnic categorization in a nation that is obsessed with this practice.

When I read Tanno's essay (1994), the discovery that she too had been posed this interminable question was embarrassingly comforting. I would estimate that I have been asked this question hundreds of times throughout my life.

The focus of this essay is a discussion of the severe personal strife, and the cultural and social consequences, for multiethnic and biracial individuals who are forced by society to ascribe to one ethnic or racial group because of America's obsession with racial categorization. My thesis begins with a personal narrative that serves to explicate some of the key problems in developing and maintaining cultural identity within a society that claims to promote cultural diversity while seemingly being intolerant of racial ambiguity. Although anecdotal evidence is not traditional research, it nonetheless resonates with the experiences of many persons and is often more compelling than statistical studies.

Within my narrative, I have integrated a historical perspective and evaluated research on how multiethnic and biracial individuals develop their racial or cultural identities. Also, I have conducted interviews with other individuals of multiethnic or biracial origin in order to consider these problems across a wider spectrum of experiences. The experiences reported by the interviewees can lend further insight into the issues surrounding multiethnic and biracial individuals in search of their identities.

Narrative and Historical Perspective

Uncovering my ethnic background has been a complex task. My father was the son of an Anglo American man and a woman of African American and Native American descent. He had olive skin and, in the international milieu that is Washington, DC, where we lived, he was often mistaken for being of Mediterranean descent. My mother is also multiethnic. Her father, a southern Baptist minister, was, according to family history, the grandson of an Anglo American Confederate Army general from North Carolina and a biracial woman who worked in his house. From all accounts the general assumed some responsibility for this son, my great grandfather, by educating him. However, my grandfather's father was perceived as white because of his phenotype and because the African Americans in the community called him "white man," though they knew he was partially black. My grandfather himself looked Anglo as...
well. He had fair skin, an aquiline nose, thin lips, and straight hair. My grandfather's wife, my maternal grandmother, was of Native American, African American, and Anglo American descent. She had high cheekbones, blue eyes, and skin coloring like a Native American. Their daughter, my mother, is a fair-skinned brunette with hazel eyes.

When I was born in Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, DC, in the 1950s, infants were separated according to race. Having blonde peach fuzz, ivory skin, and blue eyes, I was immediately placed with the white infants. On the day of my birth, my father came to the hospital to see his infant daughter, but he could not find me in the mass of little brown faces in the nursery. He became more than a little anxious as the nurses frantically searched for me only to discover me among the white babies. I was then placed with the African American infants and I was later described as the only white face among a sea of brown ones. For me, racial ambiguity began on the very first day of my life and has continued to persist.

At that time, “one drop” rules or code noir (black code) still existed. Code noir was the rule of hypodescent, which held that if you had any known African American ancestry at all, you were considered to be black regardless of your skin color or other features. As a result, my parents categorized themselves as African Americans. Throughout the history of the United States, race has been a defining factor in society. The most important thing about the stratification of the races has been the boundaries between them. That is, if the races were pure and one was a member of the race on the top, then it would be essential to maintain the boundaries that defined one's superiority, to keep people in lower categories from moving upward. Thus, U.S. law defined just who was in which racial category. Most of the boundary drawing came on the border between white and black. The boundaries were drawn not on the basis of biology—genotype and phenotype—but on the basis of descent. For the purposes of the laws of nine southern and border states in the early 1900s, a Negro was defined as “someone with a single Negro great-grandparent”; in three other southern states, a Negro great-grandparent would suffice. That is, a person with 15 white ancestors four generations back and a single Negro ancestor at the same remove was considered a Negro by U.S. law. In practice—both legal and customary—anyone with any known African ancestry was deemed an African American, but those without any trace of known African ancestry were called Whites. One drop laws existed in an attempt to keep the white race pure.

Race, then, is primarily a social construct, although there is a biological aspect to it. Social distinctions such as race come about when two or more groups of people come together in a situation of economic and status competition. Frequently such competition results in stratification, that is, in the domination of some groups by others. From the point of the dominant group, racial distinctions are a necessary tool of dominance. They serve to separate the subordinate people as Other (Spickard 1992).

In light of that, as an adolescent, I recall a discussion of genealogy and ethnicity between my parents and my mother’s siblings. They were exploring our cultural roots. My uncle concluded the discussion by definitively stating, “We’re more American Indian (specifically Cherokee) and white than we’re black, but Indians have no resources. There are many more blacks and at least there are black universities.” Because we live in a society preoccupied with racial categorization, my family felt pressured to ascribe to the black race to survive because African Americans appeared to have more resources and were politically more viable than Native Americans. So in a sense, race is then linked to power. Additionally, there may have been the pressure to call oneself African American because individuals of mixed African-Indian ancestry would be suspected of trying to escape the stigma of being black by identifying themselves as Native American. This has been particularly difficult for multiethnic and biracial people who know when they
ascribe themselves to one racial group they are denying their other significant cultural heritages that are not being recognized. I attribute the loss of my Native American cultural roots to this phenomenon.

History reveals that despite the colonists’ passage of antimiscegenation laws, intermarriage between Africans and southeastern Native Americans was common (Perdue 1979). White slave owners enacted stringent measures against interracial mixing, but the edicts were largely ignored. African Americans and Native Americans cohabitated to produce a large mixed-race progeny (Wilson 1992). This certainly is the case for the areas of North Carolina and Virginia where my mother and father were born. Both of their racial compositions significantly include Native American ancestry.

Racism appears not to have been a factor in the English bias against intermarriage with Indians, however. Perceived as darker than Europeans, Indians were considered essentially white people whose exposure to the sun and custom of painting the body with natural dyes explained their various hues. Indians were characterized as culturally degraded, as were Africans, but without the negative comments on color and physical features made about the latter. Although Africans were indisputably “Black,” with the disparaging attributions made to that color (Wilson 1992), it was not until the 1750s that Anglo Americans viewed Indians as a significantly darker race than themselves. They did not adopt red as the accepted color label for Native Americans until after 1800 (Vaughn 1982).

In my family there were stories of members who had “become Indian” and others who had “become white.” One was about a cousin who decided to identify himself primarily as a Native American rather than an African American because he determined that his Cherokee heritage was dominant. He donned Native American dress and was rumored to have gone off to the reservation to live. Recently, after extensive genealogical research, I discovered that two more cousins had changed their racial designations to Native American, presumably for the same reason.

My father’s cousin, who received her undergraduate degree from Howard University in the 1940s and her master’s degree at Columbia University, also simultaneously chose to “become white” or “pass” when she married an Italian American physician. Passing is the word used to describe “the attempt to achieve acceptability by claiming membership in some desired group while denying other racial elements in oneself thought to be undesirable.” In other words, if one were white enough and had Anglo features and hair texture, it was quite possible to pass for white. Passing allowed one to forego the brutality and unending scourge of racism at a difficult time in history for blacks. Although passing was often a means of gaining access to positions of wealth, power, privilege, and prestige normally barred to African Americans, it was not without a price (Daniel 1992).

The price of passing is a dear one. Among the most difficult things a person can be faced with is severing relationships with family and friends, as my father’s cousin did with her olive-skinned brothers and sisters. My parents illustrated how my father’s cousin’s professional achievements were juxtaposed against the loss of her identity and connection with her family. They emphasized to me that whatever privileges might be gained by passing would never compensate for the pain I would suffer should I deny any part of my ethnicity and particularly the African heritage. The movie Imitation of Life, remade in 1959, included the theme of a young woman who chose to deny her African American mother in order to pass. My family used this movie as an example of the stress and pain of passing, and they would often reference it by saying, “Never deny your racial makeup. Remember what happened to the girl in Imitation of Life.”

Therefore, I never considered passing even when faced with the dilemma of not always fully being accepted by either blacks or whites. During my teens I pursued an interest in modeling and participated in several beauty pageants. In the year I partici-
pated in the D.C. Teenager pageant, one of the African American pageant owners said it would be the first year that an African American would win, but I would not be the winner because I was not obviously black. The winner must be brown-skinned. On the other side of the coin, a couple of years later, I was in the Miss Metro pageant, whose winner would go on to compete for the Miss U.S.A. title. One of the owners, who happened to be Jewish, said that that I had no chance of winning because even though I did not look black, I referred to myself as black. He explained there was no way a black woman could win the pageant. America's obsession with race was crystallized for me in these two events, and I learned that the pervasive racism that existed on both sides of the color line would ensure that my life on the color line would not be easy.

I had attended predominantly white middle and high schools in Washington, DC, but I chose to attend Howard University, America's premier black university. In high school, I had been criticized by some blacks for "talking and acting white," and without question I certainly looked more white than black. My decision then to attend Howard owed in part to thinking that my being at the most prestigious African American university would help forge within me a strong cultural identity of "Afrocentricity," the term currently used by academics to explain the intellectual framework for African American identity (Asante 1987). The poet Sterling Brown, a 1926 Harvard graduate and 40-year veteran of the Howard English faculty, helped me better understand that people of African descent share a common experience and struggle. I would go to the Florida Avenue Grill with Brown, who was then in his 70s and no longer teaching full-time, and listen to him recount his days with Duke Ellington, with whom he had a close association. He would read letters that they had written each other and explain the evolution of Ellington's music. He spoke in vivid detail and great candor of the struggle of talented African Americans in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s (then called Negroes) to re-

ceive the recognition that they richly deserved. Sterling and his wife, Daisy, lived not too far from my parents' home, and sometimes I would visit them there. My experience at Howard helped me both academically and socially to understand the notion of Afrocentricity in terms of my own life.

During this time of forging a strong African American cultural identity, I wanted to demonstrate black pride by styling my hair in an Afro. While on a modeling job in New York City, I had the opportunity to go to dinner with a small group that included the World Heavyweight Boxing Champion, Muhammad Ali. In anticipation of meeting Ali, I doused my hair with water to bring out as much curl as possible, teased it for over an hour, and shaped it into my best Angela Davis Afro using an entire can of hair spray to hold it into that shape. Later that day when I met Ali, he took his hand and shoved my hair back off my face. Peering curiously, he exclaimed with a grin, "Why do you have your hair like this? It looks stupid. You don't have the hair for this. Don't style your hair like this." This seemed somewhat reminiscent of the time in high school when I was criticized for "talking white." I felt dejected because it seemed that I was just not black enough and somehow I was always going to be on the periphery.

My matriculation resulted in two Howard University degrees and a healthy appreciation for black culture. I learned black linguistic speech, how to cook soul food, corn row, enjoy Marvin Gaye concerts, and relate to humor from the comedian Sinbad. My experience was consistent with the findings of researchers who have argued that acceptance of the biracial or multiethnic individual by the Black community is predicated on the biracial and multiethnic individual's adoption of the mores of that community and the exhibition of specific culturally related behaviors (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, and Harris 1993; Sebring 1985). Further, some individuals will choose to identify almost exclusively with the part of themselves that society devalues most before ultimately feeling
comfortable with all aspects of self (Nash 1992). There were a few times that my African American girl friends were criticized for always "hanging out with a white girl." One time in particular, a Dorothy Dandridge-looking girlfriend defended my being black to a group of young black women by proclaiming, "Mona has always been black," by which she meant that I had never tried to pass as white. "She goes to Howard." The women retorted,

I don't care if she goes to Howard or not. You're not black until someone treats you like you're black. When I go to Neiman Marcus to shop, I can't even get one of those white sales ladies to wait on me. I bet that doesn't happen to you. Does it?

When I honestly replied, "No, that hasn't happened to me," there was no more to be said. I again felt the sting of rejection. However, for the most part, my education at Howard University fulfilled a sense of belonging that I needed and I succeeded in developing a cultural identity.

While pursuing my master's degree in human communication studies at Howard, I met my husband-to-be, who was an anomaly as a white disc jockey on the N.B.C.-owned, urban-formatted radio station. My husband was well-exposed to African American culture in Washington, DC, sometimes called Chocolate City because of its predominantly black population. Many of his friends and nearly all of his coworkers were black. However, even with all of his exposure to blacks of various hues, he did not initially recognize me as African American. When we first met, he thought that my name was Friedman and that I was Jewish. I corrected him and explained that my name was instead Freeman. Later in that conversation, I disclosed that I was black. Although I realized that I was multi-ethnic, I identified myself as black to eliminate any possible perception that I was attempting to pass.

When I was single, I dated men of different ethnicities. There were times when I dated Anglo American males and the issue of race was not broached early on. This ultimately proved to be disastrous for me when, in the company of my date's friends, I would be subjected to racist jokes about blacks. Once, on the third date with an Italian American, I brought up the issue of race, explaining that although it seemed somewhat out of context, I needed to disclose to him that I was black. His facial expression revealed his shock at my disclosure, and I never heard from him again. As a result of that experience, I vowed that if ever I dated an Anglo American again, I would discuss my ethnicity straightaway.

My husband is Anglo and Portuguese, and although he has always considered himself to be white, he is of mixed ethnicity and some would argue that he is a product of an interethnic marriage, if not interracial. As F. James Davis (1991), a sociologist, observed, "other racial minorities...can be absorbed if they become one-fourth or less of that ancestry." Therefore, although my husband is Anglo and Portuguese, he is considered white, as is our friend who is Anglo and Native American. But because Americans are accustomed to classifying anyone with any African heritage as black, these biracial or multiracial people have not been viewed the same way as other mixed ethnic or race individuals.

When my husband and I decided that we would marry, and I mentioned to a family friend, an African American who was a founder and president of a large African American bank in the United States, that I was engaged, he immediately asked, "Is he black or white?"

I replied, "He is white; actually he is Anglo and Portuguese." I wondered if I would be alienated by the black community so I asked, "Is this going to be a problem?"

My friend replied, "Portuguese is not far from black," and thus gave his approval. This is an example of how race has always been significant in the way Americans perceive others.

Ten years later, while teaching a college public speaking course in Louisville, Kentucky, one of my white students made an appointment with me to discuss his prospective topic for his upcoming personal opinion speech. I had asked the students to
select a topic that they felt strongly about and then inform the class about it. This particular student sat down in my office and began with, "Professor Leonard, I've chosen a topic that I feel very strongly about. In fact, I can't think of anything that I feel more strongly about."

"Well, I'm very interested in hearing about this topic. Please go on," I said. "My topic is about mixed-race marriages and people. I don't believe in it. I think that the races should be separate and not comingle, especially not reproduce. There's nothing worse than mixed-race people; it's an abomination," he pronounced confidently, leaning back in his chair.

"Hmmm, I see. Well, I've always taken the position of never dictating to students what their topics should be, so please don't feel as if you can't speak on this topic because you think you would be personally offending me as a mixed-race person myself. I believe that I can maintain my objectivity and professionalism," I explained very calmly looking him in the eye.

I saw his jaw drop and what appeared to be a shocked look that replaced the previous smug one. He immediately began gathering his papers to leave my office. He seemed unsettled when he said, "Thanks for your time, Professor Leonard. I need to give my topic some more thought."

By the next class period, he announced very casually that he had changed his topic and slipped me a piece of paper with a new one. I considered that he might withdraw from my class, but he did not. I had thought that, from his perspective, I would have lost all credibility. Instead, he never missed class, watched me intently, and appeared to listen attentively to every word I said. We never spoke about those issues again and he treated me very deferentially. I treated him with the same professional courtesy that I extended to my other students. In the end, he successfully completed the course.

In birth and in death, my family's genotype and phenotype defied the racial categorizations that have prevailed in this country for a hundred years. As an example of this, in 1998 my father passed away and my mother chose an African American-owned funeral home. When the funeral director called the morgue, the medical examiners, recognizing the funeral home as black owned, assumed that the director was inquiring about retrieving the body of an African American. They explained that they had no African American males, but they did have the body of a white male. The funeral director had assumed that my father was African American; however, she looked at my mother and said, "Mrs. Freeman, is your husband black or white? The reason that I'm asking is that they say they have a Jack Freeman who is white. In fact, the death certificate has already been completed, and it lists his race as white. They say that this man is undoubtedly white. In fact, if you want the death certificate to state 'black,' you'll have to provide documentation to have it changed." The irony may not be apparent, but on both the occasion of my birth and my father's death, our physical features defied the predominant racial classifications that exist in the United States.

In my immediate family, my husband is Anglo and Portuguese, I am multiethnic, and our adoptive son is Micronesian and considered to be Asian American or a Pacific Islander. In my extended family, there are Anglos, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. The skin hues range from very fair to dark brown. When I responded to the inquiry from the student mentioned at the beginning of this essay that my family looks like a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, I knew that this analogy was not a flip remark, but starkly close to reality.

Asserting an Identity for Multiethnic and Biracial Individuals

In my interviews, I have discovered that other multiethnic and biracial individuals have sought different ways to develop their racial identities. A female friend, who is also multiethnic and looks even more "white" than I do with her bone-straight hair and pencil-thin lips, chose another ap-
proach to forging her black identity. Having absolutely no African phenotype, she is in no way discernible as African American by her appearance. At least for me, my hair would curl some and my skin is somewhat olive, so many would say that I looked Italian. However, my friend looks like a WASP. She too attended primarily white middle and high schools. Ultimately, she chose to attend and was graduated from Emerson College in Boston. She strongly yearned to be identified as black, and the only way that she could was to speak in black vernacular.

Her mother, a teacher, did not speak this way, but my friend went about learning black linguistic speech with the same kind of intensity that she applied to her academics. She spoke with disdain of members of her family who had severed ties in order to pass as white. There were some members of her family who identified themselves as African Americans as she did (although they had no discernible African features) and other family members who were passing.

My cousins, products of a Latino father and a biracial mother, have chosen in some instances to define themselves as Latinos. Their stated reasons are that society has seemed to force an individual to ascribe to one racial categorization and also that they are mostly Latino. Some African Americans have criticized them for this, citing that they are trying to distance themselves from other African Americans.

Courtney (1995), who is biracial, echoed the same sentiment in his Newsweek article, in which he stated,

My white friends want me to act one way—white. My African American friends want me to act another—black. Pleaseing them both is nearly impossible and leaves little room to be just me.

Friends of my husband and myself, a couple in which the husband is American-born Chinese and the wife is white, have a daughter who is then biracial, Asian and Anglo. The father is an orthopedic surgeon and the mother is in law school. They live in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. They are fortunate in that they have been able to afford to send their daughter to a private school whose administrators and student body embrace cultural diversity. Therefore, their 13-year-old daughter has not been confronted with the issues that Courtney has faced. This may be partly because their daughter is Asian and white rather than black and white, and because she is only 13 years old and Courtney is in his 20s. The mother explained that when faced with government forms that categorize American citizens into six groups—white, black, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, American Indian, and other—she chooses "other" for her daughter. She views her daughter as biracial and she has reared her daughter with knowledge about both cultures. However, the mother stated that she would like to be able to check the boxes for both white and Asian on forms and applications to describe her daughter, as the 2000 U.S. census allowed.

Similarly, one of my students, whose infant son is African American and Arab American, explained that she would like to rear him with knowledge of both cultures and would like to be able to check more than one race category for his ethnicity.

Halle Berry, who won the Academy Award for Best Actress in 2002 and is biracial, explained that she chooses to identify herself as African American. Berry, whose mother is Anglo and father is African American, said that because she is brown-skinned, people often perceive her as African American; therefore, she believes she should identify herself as such. The musician Lenny Kravitz is also biracial. He is half-Jewish and half-Jamaican, but because he is brown-skinned, he is perceived as African American. The many incidences when genotype and phenotype determine how society perceives and categorizes the individual have seemed to help and influence how these biracial individuals categorize themselves.

Tiger Woods, the golfer, brought the issue of multiethnicity to the forefront when he won the Masters tournament and the media described him as African American. His mother is of Thai descent and his father is African American. Woods insisted that he is not just African American. The then-21-
A 10-year-old golf prodigy said he could never be placed into one race category that best described his ethnicity, so he always checked two boxes. After Woods described himself as multiethnic, the age-old debate over racial categories was reignited.

"Truthfully, I feel very fortunate, and equally proud to be both African American and Asian. The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should not make a difference. It does not make a difference to me. The bottom line is that I am an American... and proud of it!" (1)

said Woods (Brand-Williams 1997).

However, in Parker's (1999) *Washington Post* article, she stated,

Understand. It's not that we don't respect Tiger Wood's right to call himself a Cabilasinian. We just don't think it will help him get a cab in D.C.

Woods invented the word Cabilasinian as a description of his racial composition that is Caucasian, black, Native American, and Asian. Nevertheless, when asked to check off boxes of racial designations, he chooses two—African American and Asían—based on his primary cultural roots.

**Future Implications**

Despite the fact that America as a nation still struggles with the issue of race and racial categorization, for more and more of its citizens, racial boundaries are ceasing to be as important as they once were. My own marriage is representative of the increased rate of intermarriage between Anglos and minorities and among minorities (such as African American and Asian). These marriages now rival those of second-generation immigrants whose parents came to America in the decades near the turn of the last century. Intermarriage among the descendants of those early immigrants, such as a marriage between an Irish American and an Italian American, over time all but erased ethnic stereotypes that once defined white Americans. Although white ethnicity was once a salient feature in American life, the 1990 census found that only one in five white couples share the same ethnicity (i.e., an Italian married to an Italian) (Fletcher 1998).

As reported in the *Washington Post*, the rate that couples of different races and ethnicities are marrying each other not only complicates predictions about the racial makeup of the nation, it also calls into question widely accepted concepts of race. For example, the high rates of interracial marriage and evolving notions of race recently forced the government to rethink the types of categories and classifications it used in the 2000 census (Fletcher 1998).

Although a "multiracial" category was not included in the 2000 census (cited in Fletcher 1998, A1), the Census Bureau changed its rules to allow people to identify themselves by as many as five official racial reporting categories as they saw fit. There is no telling as yet how the children of interracial unions will identify themselves in the future, as their concepts of racial identity become more fluid (Fletcher 1998).

Almost one in three children whose fathers are white and mothers are black identified themselves as white, according to an analysis of 1990 census data done by Harvard University sociologist Mary C. Waters. That was almost a 50 percent increase over 1980, when fewer than one in four of the children with black mothers and white fathers were identified as white—a change in a nation that for generations promoted the idea that even one drop of black blood makes someone black (Fletcher 1998).

Similarly, half of the children of white fathers and Native American mothers were identified as white, and more than half of the children of white fathers and Japanese or Chinese mothers were listed as white in 1990. "There is no one rule governing the choices made by parents about mixed-race children's identities," stated Waters (cited in Fletcher 1998, A1). As reported by Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), an Atlanta-based advocacy group, 2.4 percent of all Americans who filled out the 2000 census chose to check more than one box (2001).

However, in Parker's (1999) *Washington Post* article, she criticized her biracial
cousin who claimed she is white and offers an admonition.

My cousin calls herself white and I see a side of me passing away. Swallowed by the larger, more powerful fish in the mainstream. And I wonder if that will be the future for my family, some who look like Kim—others who look like me but have married white, or no doubt will. And I wonder, ultimately, if that will be the future for black people. Passing themselves right out of existence. Swearing it was an accident. Each generation trading up a shade and a grade until there is nothing left but old folks in fold-up lawn chairs on backyard decks who gather family members close around to tell nostalgic tales that begin ‘Once upon a time when we were colored...’ (F4)

Further challenging the notions of racial boundaries, Davis (1991) suggested that 75 to 90 percent of black Americans have white ancestors and possibly 1 percent of white Americans—millions of people—have black ancestors (presumably without knowing it). In the Newshour With Jim Lehrer, it was reported that 10 to 15 percent of white Americans have some black blood in them (Page 1997), a marked increase since 1991. This presupposes that there is more heterogeneity in our population than we even realize.

Race has moved, it should be noted, beyond just biology to the links between race, power, and democratic representation. In the 2000 census, respondents were allowed to check all races that describe them by marking one or more of the 14 boxes. However, some mixed-race people, who could have legitimately checked a number of boxes, checked only “Black” to preserve the efficacy of blacks as a political group (Guinier and Torres 2002). Some civil rights groups fear that the multiethnic designation would do more harm than good by sapping their political base. Julian Bond, the civil-rights activist, has said, “I very much oppose diluting the power and the strength of numbers as they affect legal decisions about race in this country” (cited in Cose 1995, 71–72). This compounds the internal discord that multiethnic individuals feel because they may see themselves, as do I, inextricably linked in fate and love with African Americans and would not want their multiethnic status to be injurious to the nexus between African Americans’ political and economic power.

Although there are those who find this reality difficult to accept, our nation is becoming even more heterogeneous and the reality is that this will include many more multiethnic and biracial people.

**Conclusion**

Cultural diversity should not be just a buzzword in this nation, but instead we should honestly celebrate cultural diversity. Ideally, we should dismantle the racial classification scheme that has primarily benefited white America and perpetuated the oppression of certain people. Just what would replace it for social, political, or economic reasons is not totally clear, but if some kind of grouping is necessary, then it should be something that identifies people more by their culture than by their race or color. Black people from the United States, France, and Zimbabwe are vastly different in many important ways of describing a person though they all are called black. As are white people who are Irish different from those of Greek descent. Most important, classification by color does not lend itself to increased understanding.

As diligent as I have been in finding and developing my black identity, I prefer instead to define myself as *multiethnic* because it is more accurate and inclusive of all of my cultural roots. Additionally, I would opt to rename myself as a rejection of the rule of hypodescent (“one drop” rule) because I am as much Native American as I am African American. Until now, multiethnic people, such as myself, have not been afforded the luxury of celebrating their total origin in deference to laws dictating what they could call themselves. By renaming myself, I would be allowed to embrace all of my ethnicities and the cultures of each. In this way, I could identify myself by my whole self, rather than by just a part.
My motivation in wanting to rename myself should not be interpreted as distancing myself from my African American ancestry. It would not deny any part of me, but would embrace every part. Frankly, there are those in my position who resent being forced to identify themselves in one category and thereby to exclude significant cultural roots. I am extremely proud of my African American heritage and celebrate it much more than my other cultural backgrounds. I am not seeking a more favorable ranking than blacks, although some individuals do tend to de-emphasize the African American aspect of their identities because of the continual stigma attached to being black in America (Root 1992; Daniel 1992; Gibbs et al. 1989; Poussaint 1984). For me this is arguably not the case, for to do this would be tacit acceptance of and agreement with the prejudicial ranking system that has grown out of the permeating racism in this country. I do not object to being referred to as African American; however, I believe that we need to bring the name multiethnic into common usage. In truth, I am Native American, African American, and Anglo American. I am a woman of color. True egalitarianism would free me to embrace all of my cultural heritages without worrying that this would be interpreted as a defection from my African American ancestry.

It is somewhat distressing, however, that the result of renaming myself (and others like me) would contribute to effectively decrease the number of individuals who are now considered African American, thereby reducing the number of prized slots in already beleaguered programs aimed at helping to compensate for historical patterns of discrimination against blacks (Daniel 1992; Douglas 1988; Radcliffe 1988). A system needs to be put in place to ensure that certain groups are “grandfathered” in and will not lose certain benefits that have been theirs under the present classification scheme.

There must be a way that multiethnic and biracial individuals can embrace all of their ethnicities without sharpening the stratification that exists among individuals who are of African descent and without engendering the kind of criticism that Tiger Woods has received. It is not my intention to exacerbate and perpetuate the divide between blacks of African phenotype and genotype and those who more approximate European phenotypical traits. I am concerned that colorism is also an integral part of this hierarchical system and that social status is somehow ascribed by the lightness of one’s skin. The prejudicial treatment of same-race people on the basis of their color has been a divisive issue among blacks. As Guinier and Torres (2002) stated,

Thus, the individual who is raced as dark-skinned and classed as poor may be trapped and made to feel less worthy not just by those in the white majority but by others in the community of color. (85)

This is a personal source of consternation given the history of friction between black women of lighter hues and those of darker hues because of the perceived preferential treatment of the former. My multiethnic identity should be a nonhierarchical identity.

In the United States, race is paramount as a socially significant construct. However, for us to continue to flourish in this new millennium, Americans must eradicate the obsession with race as a categorizing system favoring certain genotypes and phenotypes. It does not contribute to the understanding of an individual, but was invented for the purpose of oppressing people of different physical characteristics (i.e., skin color and facial features). Because of their unique and significant role in shaping minds, educators need to lead in changing our propensity to rank people and in advocating the abolition of race as a construct. However, we must be careful that our present system is not replaced with another insidious means of ordering that would perpetuate the dispossession of people who have held “other” status (Root 1992).

Culture involves the shared meaning of values, ways of behaving, beliefs, religion, and symbols. From the standpoint of un-
understanding and facilitating communication, if we grouped people it would be preferable that we should think in terms of culture. We should be educating our students about different cultures and encouraging them to be ethnoreticle with regard to these differences. Understanding an individual's cultural background will give us insight into that individual's values and ways of behaving in a way that race or an individual's color cannot.

If we abolish race as the predominant categorizing system, then perhaps multiethnic and biracial individuals could more easily embrace and celebrate all of their ethnicities. Recently, while conducting a discussion of intercultural communication, one of my female students stood up and said, "I am Sioux." She then went on to describe the Native American culture and I thought, "I should know you. You are my sister, too." Essayist Clarence Page (1997) of the Chicago Tribune commented, "If people cannot call themselves what they want to call themselves, they cannot call themselves truly free."

**Endnotes**

1. **Multiethnic** and **multiracial** are used interchangeably. **Anglo** and **white** are used interchangeably, as are **African American** and **black**. **Anglo** is the cultural designation and **white** is the informal racial designation. The use of the uppercase "B" in the word **Black** when it refers to African Americans and the use of the uppercase of "W" in the word **White** when it refers to Caucasians are used by some writers. I chose to not to change these writers' usage and this explains the lack of uniformity.

2. **Biracial** refers only to the experience of having parents with two distinct racial identities. In most instances, this occurs when one parent is black and one is white. **Multiracial** and **multiethnic** refer to experience of having parents with multiple racial or ethnic identities.

3. **Interracial** refers to the relationship between two monoracial persons who have different racial identities. **Interethnic** refers to the relationship between two monoethnic persons who have different ethnic backgrounds.

**References**


