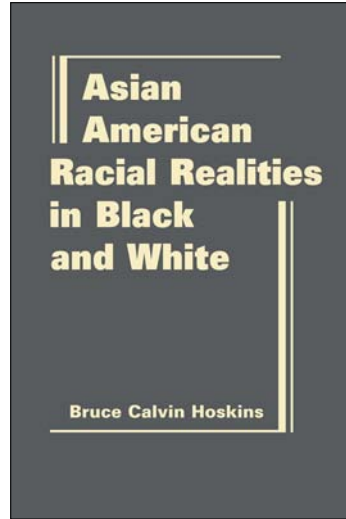


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Asian American  
Racial Realities  
in Black and White

Bruce Calvin Hoskins

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# 1

## Introduction

I have seen myself as black all of my life; from the friends that I kept, to the sports that I played, to the music that I listened to and to the way that I spoke. I have never had a reason to doubt my blackness, until one day, while working in a math learning center at a community college, I helped an older Japanese woman with her math. As I assisted her, I noticed that she often made notes in *kanji* (Japanese handwriting) beside the instructions in her math book. When she saw that I observed this, she immediately apologized and told me that she wrote notes in the margins so that she could understand the directions. I tried to put her at ease by telling her it was not a problem and that my mother wrote notes like that all the time. After a moment of silence, she finally asked me the nationality of my mother. When I told her that my mother was Japanese, without hesitation she said, “Oh, that is why you are so good at math!”

This woman’s surprise reveals a personal and social understanding that black people are not supposed to be good at math, while people of Japanese heritage are skilled at math. What it also demonstrated was that somewhere in her mind she questioned how a “black” man could be so good at math. My assumed race did not fit my known abilities, aptitudes, and attitudes. Simply stated, I did not make racial sense to her.

However, once my racial background was revealed, her common sense notions of race needed to form a new “racial logic” surrounding people of multiracial backgrounds: that people who are black and Japanese are good at math too. This understanding of race and racial hierarchy made me rethink my entire past regarding my assumption that I was black and that everyone treated me like I was black. Did my black friends think that I was good at school in general, but math specifically because I was Japanese? Did my white and Asian friends think the same thing? Did people actively wonder how a black man could be so good at math? How many people came to the same conclusion when they found

out I was of black and Japanese heritage because I was too smart for a black person? Also, what would have been different if I did not look so “black”? What would my experiences have been if I were mixed with white? Would people still have assumed that I was smart because I was Japanese if I were Asian and white?

People of multiracial backgrounds have been used throughout history to create and recreate racial categories, to give race meaning and to maintain racial hierarchy in the United States, and it is still happening today. Therefore, my research will analyze how the concept of race is given meaning on the macro and micro levels in order to try to understand how racial categories are constructed, and how racial hierarchies are established, maintained and enforced through the experiences of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study is an effort to pull current public discourse and the majority of academic research regarding multiracial people away from treating race in the same manner as ethnicity (Fulbeck 2006; Gaskins 1999; Root 1996). Thinking that one’s race can be discarded by a given individual or absorbed into mainstream culture, as is assumed with European ethnicities, allows an understanding of racial identity as an issue of choice and assumes that increased intermarriage signifies acceptance through marital assimilation. However, what this paradigm does not acknowledge is that the assimilation process has been indelibly shaped through the concept of race because of the social constraints it imposes on these choices in our everyday lives.

My investigation focuses primarily on how people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds experience race in their everyday lives, and will undergo the process of uncovering how the white/black continuum affects how they were socialized into understanding what race means. Examining the lived lives of people of multiple racial backgrounds allows us to understand the complex nature of how race is socially constructed, broadens current understanding of theories concerning race and sheds light on how discourse regarding multiracial people functions as a racial project that promotes, enforces and perpetuates essentialist notions of race and racial hierarchy through its focus on identity rather than racial justice.

This research examines, questions and confronts three of the most often assumed outcomes of an increasingly multiracial society. First, is the idea that the increase of people of multiracial heritage will eventually result in the discontinued use of racial categories (Gilroy

2003; Zack 1993). Although the number of children of multiracial heritage is increasing (Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001), what will be observed is how racial categories are actually further reified through discourse surrounding people of multiple racial backgrounds, both by the multiracial person and through social interaction with family, friends and others.

Second, is that people of multiracial backgrounds will personally challenge racial categories and use their personal experiences to contradict race and racism (Brunnsma 2006; Root 1996; Zack 1993). This idea comes from the understanding that the multiracial movement is largely, if not solely, an issue of identity. However, what this study will bring to the forefront is how the personal identities of people of multiracial backgrounds follow distinctly racial patterns that ultimately privilege whiteness and devalue blackness. In other words, the development of an identity is primarily *racial* in its composition, as multiracial people continuously assign, assess and evaluate their attitudes, aptitudes and abilities in a profoundly racial, and many times racist, manner.

And lastly, is the public notion that multiracial people will experience less racism, i.e., gain greater social acceptance, and live lives that are less constrained by race because of their “ambiguous” phenotypes (DaCosta 2006; Guevarra 2003; Streeter 1996; Hollinger 1995), or because their racial make-up allows them to be “bridges” between their racial communities (Rockquemore et al. 2009), and/or they represent the best of both worlds (Hall and Trude 2001; Hall 1996; Hall 1992). Currently, the best example of this public opinion is Tiger Woods, whose meteoric rise in the world of advertising was about his skill at golf *and* his multiracial background (DaCosta 2006). However, again this research will expose the seeming lack of hesitation by society to “fit” people of multiracial backgrounds into mono-racial categories, and therefore, discriminate against them according to their own ideologies, and also how Asian and black people often discriminate against people of multiracial backgrounds because of their assumed lack of authenticity.

Another related emphasis of this research is to address the assumption that an increase in interracial families signifies the breakdown of racist ideology in general and towards the interracially married groups specifically (Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001; Patterson 1997). Although this is a common belief, an examination of Asian and white and Asian and black interracial families reveals two main findings: one, that people in interracial marriages in general, but interracially married black couples specifically, get married *despite* the

racial animosity between the races, not because they have lessened; and two, that race and racism are central ideologies that continue to operate in the lives of interracially married couples, and how they socialize their children regarding what races are acceptable marriage partners. Interracially married Asian and white couples impose a “do as I say, not as I do” philosophy regarding their children’s choice in marriage partners that pressures their children to marry people from socially acceptable racial groups. Also, it will be demonstrated that interracially married Asian and white couples teach their children that black people are the most undesirable marriage partners, therefore, privileging whiteness and maintaining white supremacy. Interracially married Asian and black couples also reinforce the color line by teaching their children to be aware of how people from other races may not think of black people as acceptable marriage partners.

## **Methodology**

### *Why Asian/White and Asian/Black People?*

This study focused on people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds because of several factors. First, the relative size of the mixed-race Asian population cannot be numerically understated. In the 1990 U.S. Census, the reported number of children from interracial households was 1,037,420, and nearly half of those children, 466,590, were in families that marked one parent as Asian and the other parent as white (Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001). This number was even more astounding when I considered the fact that Asian Americans only make up 3 percent of the U.S. population, and that multiracial Asian/black people were not considered in the final number.

Second, many multiracial activists, authors and scholars suggested that the experiences of minority/minority mixed-race individuals may be substantially different than those of white/minority heritage, and that much research was needed in this area (Hall 2001; Thornton and Gates 2001; Hall 1996; Hollinger 1993; Kich 1992; Omi 2001; Omi and Winant 1996; Root 2001; Root 1992; Williams 1992; Waters 1990). Although some research was done directly regarding people of minority/minority heritage (Thornton and Gates 2001; Comas-Diaz 1996; Hall 1992; Thornton 1992), these studies primarily focus on mental health and identity issues rather than racial experiences. The little research that was conducted using people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds also focused on ethnic identification (Hall

2001; Williams 1992), rather than exploring how these two groups experience race in their everyday lives, and how those experiences may privilege whiteness.

And lastly, this study focused on people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds because it allowed the creation of a theoretical framework for understanding how people of multiracial backgrounds experience race that recognized issues of power, especially as it pertained to white supremacy (Omi 2001; Winant 2001). Although studies mentioned how being of Asian/white or Asian/black background could make a difference in how one chooses an ethnic identity (Hall 2001; Williams 1992), it was important to note that these projects did not develop how those choices were restricted, at best, and forced, at worst, because of the privileging of white racial mixture over black.

### *Who Did I Interview?*

In this research I have interviewed a total of thirty-two respondents of Asian/White and Asian/Black parentage with one parent identifying as Asian<sup>1</sup>, and the other parent identifying as either white or black<sup>2</sup>. I also interviewed six sets of interracial parents, three with a white spouse and three with a black spouse in order to add context to the responses of the multiracial people I interviewed. Because of the intricacies of sampling this population, a snowball sampling method was used to generate my sample by using my initial social contacts first, and once interviewed, asking them if they knew anyone else that I could interview who fit my research (See *Appendix A*).

In-depth interviews with basic demographic, open-ended and Likert-scale questions were used in order to develop a theoretical framework that gave greater understanding of how people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds experienced race in their everyday lives. Basic demographic questions included variables such as age, parent's birth country and whether they ever lived in their foreign parent's birth country. Open-ended questions asked how the respondent identified themselves racially, and what their basic social relationships were with other racial and social groups. The Likert-scale questions pertained to how the respondent felt they and others perceived their race, what racial groups did they feel accepted by and how much did they identify with their parents' racial groups (See *Appendix B*). Questions for the parents were similar to those asked of people of multiracial backgrounds (See *Appendix C*). These questions sought to gain a deeper understanding of the influences that institutions, social location, family, perceived

acceptance/rejection and social understandings of race have on people of multiracial backgrounds.

### *Social Demographics of Sample*

Of the thirty-two participants, sixteen people of Asian/white and sixteen people of Asian/black backgrounds were represented in this study. The even recruitment of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds was not meant to be understood as a representative sample, for people who are Asian/white by far exceeded the number of Asian/black people (Hall and Turner 2001; Williams-Leon and Nakashima 2001). However, since this study attempted to analyze the differences of how a multiracial Asian person of white or black background experiences race, it was necessary to oversample people of Asian/black backgrounds in order to make meaningful comparisons between these two populations.

Providing the demographic information of my group is not an effort to make general statements; it is an effort to give the reader a ready context to help understand the various social situations that the people in my sample may have experienced. The average age of my sample was twenty-nine years old, but my Asian/white group was considerably younger on average (24.6 years old) than the Asian/black group (33.8 years old). Of my sample, twenty-three respondents were born in the United States, while seventeen visited and twelve lived in their foreign parent's homeland. Twenty-six people had foreign-born mothers, and races of the mothers were as follows: three white, one black, fifteen Japanese, two Chinese and nine Filipino.

Twenty-four people had a father in the military, with twenty-seven total fathers being born in the United States. This was expected given that I drew my sample from San Diego County, which has two large military bases within its borders. I did ask which parent was in the military, but all the responses were that the father was the one in the military. The identified branches for fathers were as follows: fifteen Marine Corps, six Navy, one Army and one Air Force. This breakdown makes more sense given that the largest Marine Corp base, Camp Pendleton, is located in Northern San Diego County. The racial breakdown for fathers was: eleven white, fifteen black, two Japanese, one Chinese and one other Asian.

Participants were also recruited evenly in accordance to gender so that there would be eight men and eight women in each group. The even gender distribution was in response to literature that strongly suggested that being male or female may affect how a person of diverse racial background experiences race (Allman 1996; Comas-Diaz 1996; Hall



1992; Hall and Turner 2001; Root 1992; Root 2001; Streeter 1996; Valverde 2001; Williams 1992). Lastly, all respondents were at least eighteen years old in order to try and eliminate the trials of adolescence from this project (Hall 1992; Thornton and Gates 2001).

In summary, although I focus on the experiences of Asian/white and Asian/black people, these two groups are not the focus of my study. What I argue throughout my research is that people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds provide a clearer lens to investigate the inter-workings of the concept of race, and, therefore, allow us to better theorize this construct. However, before I can go into more detail regarding the elements of this theoretical framework, we must first establish what race is and how this understanding has affected the manner in which we interpret people of diverse racial backgrounds.

## **Approaching Race**

### *What is Race?*

Race, gender and class are all socially constructed phenomena, which means that categories are defined, given meaning, enforced, changed, destroyed and recreated through human social interaction (Ore 2006; Lopez 2003). However, race is inherently different than gender and class because of the lack of objective, scientifically valid ways to measure racial categories (Lao et al. 2006; Fine et al. 2005; Commas 1961), while the social differences that exist between other groups are objective, scientifically quantifiable and irreducible to other social phenomena (Lipsitz 1998; Nash 1997; Lopez 1996; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Omi and Winant 1994; Spickard 1992; Thornton 1992). Although the meanings of gender and class are highly subjective, can change dramatically from location to location and can be spatially located within a place as small as a household or as broad as a nation, the social construction of gender starts with the biological distinction between the sexes, while class distinctions are centered on who has more access to valued resources (Lorber 2006; Gilbert 1998; Omi and Winant 1994).

The incongruence between the lack of objective measure for racial categories and the persistence of the social effect of race have created the belief in many social scientists that race is somehow not real (Loveman 1999; Patterson 1997) and/or must be a manifestation or driven by other social constructs, namely class (Jung 2003; Wilson 1978). However, the paradox of the prevalence of race does not call for the abandonment of the concept of race, but a definition that can

adequately explain the seeming inconsistency. In order to accomplish this task, I will first develop a socio-historical perspective of the concept of race, and then apply that context to the definition that I will develop as a result of this analysis.

### *The Beginnings of Race*

The word “race” was first used in sixteenth century Europe and was based on kinship relationships and ancestry rather than physical characteristics, e.g., skin color (Feagin and Feagin 1999). The focus on heritage most likely occurred because of the lack of concrete and consistent physical distinctions between European peoples. The British and the Irish are excellent examples of this, as both groups would be considered “white” in the United States, but in Europe there exists a rigid hierarchy between these two groups that is believed to be biological in nature (Kennedy 2000; Roediger 1991).

Although physical dissimilarity does not manifest itself in the first usages of race, it is clear that some type of cultural distinction is necessary in order to fully actuate the concept of race through an analysis of English clothing laws. In *Channels of Desire*, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen clearly demonstrate that clothes not only distinguished classes because of the unaffordability of lavish outfits, but also that these garments served as symbols of domination because the legal dress codes that determined social class were publicly and corporally enforced:

No apprentice whatsoever should presume ... to wear (1) any clothing except what he received from his master; (2) a hat, or anything except a woolen cap ... (3) ruffles, cuffs, loose collars ... (4) anything except canvas, fustian [a stout fabric of cotton and flax], sack cloth, English leather, or woolen doublets, without any silver or silk trimming. Punishment for violation of the statute was at the discretion of the master for a first offense; a public whipping for a second offense; and six months added to the period of indenture for the third offense. (Ewen and Ewen 1992, p. 87)

This punishment is very similar to the punishment carried out against people who married across the color line in the United States. “Punishments for violating anti-miscegenation laws included enslavement, exile, whippings, fines, and imprisonment. Some jurisdictions punished those who performed such marriages” (Kennedy 2000, p. 145). This strongly suggests that by connecting the punishments

to the crimes, one can also connect the crimes to the socially constructed categories.

Although Europeans may get credit for using the word “race” first, the concept is global and does not depend on European influence or context in order to establish. This can be demonstrated with a brief examination of the Eta in Japan.

### *The Eta*

The origins of the Eta are unknown, but the two prevailing theories are that they are an outcast group of people of historically Hindu, Korean or Chinese descent who worked the dirty jobs of Japanese society, i.e., tanning and butchery, both of which were looked down upon by the Buddhist religion (Donoghue 1957). Although not physically distinct to an outsider from the rest of the Japanese population, the Eta people are an egregiously socially, economically, politically and religiously oppressed group that is constructed to be biologically distinct and genetically inferior to Japanese people:

In such reports the Eta were generally referred to as being biologically inferior and inherently criminal, and anti-social acts in which they were involved were exaggerated, headlined, and given prominence in news reports. (Smythe and Naitoh 1953, p. 25)

So close in likeness are the Eta to the Japanese that laws were passed that established a dress code and hairstyle for the Eta people (Smythe and Naitoh 1953).

Although being associated with dirty jobs resulted in negative stereotypes of this group as innately “dirty,” the evidence of a racial project is clearly illustrated by their treatment within the social and legal institutions of Japan. In reading the history of the Eta, one cannot help but to make the connection to black people in the United States and Jim Crow laws. The Eta were seen as less than human, or one-seventh of one ordinary Japanese:

In one recorded instance in which a non-Eta killed an Eta, the judge ruled that punishment against the accused could not be carried out until at least seven Eta had been killed by the defendant, since the life of one ordinary Japanese was equal to the lives of seven Eta. (Smythe and Naitoh 1953, p. 22)

The Eta were considered biologically distinct and inferior to the point of creating anti-miscegenation laws and the producing of an

ideology that stated that one would be unhappy and one's children would suffer severe physical and mental illnesses if one were to intermarry with them (Donoghue 1957).

Although officially freed August 28, 1871, the social construction of the Eta as an inferior biological group led to discrimination in school, work, politics and housing; however, this ill treatment paved the way for resistance by the Eta that is highly reflective of how black people and other Americans fought for Civil Rights:

As a result of this organized effort, violence ensued in several parts of the country as the Eta attempted to enter public bath houses and other public places, demanding equal treatment and to insist on fairness to their children in public schools. (Smythe and Naitoh 1953, p. 27)

Therefore, to move to a sociology of group making would include global situations such as the Eta, but also acknowledge that these groupings are racial constructs in their truest form. Given this understanding, a definition of race must address how heredity forms the basis of the ideology that justifies the social inequality existing between groups.

### *The Social Construction of Race*

It is with this understanding that I propose that race is a forced socially, historically and geographically-based concept where differential social statuses are constructed to be understood as hereditarily distinct groupings, and are arbitrarily assigned cultural/physical differences to identify and justify the social inequalities that exist between these groups. Although modern understandings of race coincide with visible physical characteristics, race is not as much about physical distinctions as it is determining a person's social status through heritage. Physical distinctions are only as important as they are consistent with socially constructed understandings of what is an essential characteristic of a specific race, e.g., skin color, hair texture. However, if how one looks to others is not consistent with the heritage of their parents, then their heritage, not their phenotype, is used to determine their social location.

Once it becomes demonstrated that race is a social construction, it becomes important to describe how this is accomplished. The prevailing discourse in the social sciences suggests that race is a social construction devoid of any predetermined and inherent biological meaning (Lipsitz 1998; Nash 1997; Lopez 1996; Spickard 1992; Thornton 1992).

Understanding race in this manner allows us to connect how macro and micro-level forces give meaning to racial categories by assigning social consequences to these groupings.

### *Race on a Macro-level*

The concept of race begins its official recognition within the United States Constitution and is immediately and inseparably linked to racial hierarchy through the establishment of the Three-Fifths Compromise that states that slaves should be counted as three-fifths of a person (Mezey 2003; Snipp 2003). Not only was racial hierarchy established, but racial stratification soon followed, as advantages and privileges were given to people who were determined to be white. In no place is this clearer than in the 1790 Naturalization Act, which stated that only “free, white persons” could become naturalized citizens of the United States, which allowed whites the advantage of citizenship, the accumulation of wealth and equality under the law (McGoveny 2003; Lopez 1996; Fong 1971).

These objective, quantifiable advantages that whites have in comparison to non-whites have created what George Lipsitz calls a “possessive investment in whiteness” where:

Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through the unequal educations allocated to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that pass on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations. (Lipsitz 1998, p. vii)

Whiteness gives distinct advantages in the accumulation and transfer of wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 1995), housing (Lipsitz 1998), jobs (Wilson 1996), education (Kozol 2006; Steinberg 1995), the justice system (Cole 2006) and politics (Saito 1998). Linking these discrepancies to the concept of race is where many social scientists stop in regards to demonstrating how race is socially constructed. However, what this represents is not what race *is*, but what the consequences of race *are*, and does not adequately challenge how racial categories are formed in the first place.

Therefore, the social construction of race does not start with the differential social rewards assigned to these groups, but in the actual

construction of them. In other words, who is white? Who is black? Who are Native Americans and Asians? And where do these groups fit in the racial hierarchy? These are the questions that begin the social construction process, and are clearly evidenced through a socio-historical analysis of the U.S. Census and the legal system.

### *The U.S. Census*

How we conceive of race creates the context for racism, and the U.S. Census has played a central role in informing society of who is of what race. This construction informs us as to who deserves what resources. The need for the census arose out of the creation of distinct subordinate groups in the United States Constitution—Indians and slaves—and our need to count them (Mezey 2003). Although racial characteristics were always used as an indicator for one's legal and political status, these characteristics were explicitly introduced in 1820 when the term "color" was added to the census (Snipp 2003). Even though racial categories are themselves socially constructed in numerous ways, I will focus on how multiracial people of black/white heritage were counted in the census to demonstrate how this concept works.

Interestingly enough, it was during and immediately after slavery when people of multiracial black/white heritage were counted in the census. 1850 marked the first year mulattos were counted, with 1890 adding the categories of quadroon and octoroon, people of one-quarter and one-eighth black heritage respectively (Snipp 2003; Mezey 2003). During this time period, many people of black/white heritage had an intermediate social position between that of white and black, with the most notable group being the Creoles, a group mixed with black, French and Spanish heritage where some even owned slaves (Borders 1988).

Unlike Indians and blacks, there was no legal or constitutional reason to count mulattos besides their being so prolific on the American landscape, which was also the main reason the Chinese were counted in California (Menzy 2003). The counting of mulattos reveals how racial categories are socially constructed to the forefront, as enumerators were instructed to use social status as a key to interpreting a person's racial category if they were physically ambiguous (Snipp 2003). What this means is that a person could be white, if and only if, they were of the status of whites, in other words, free. While if you looked white, but were a slave, then you were obviously black. Understanding the connection between color and status ushered in the concept of passing, where a person that would be socially considered black passes as white (Daniel 1992).

The social construction of race goes to a new level as one considers how racial categories are affected by location. This is demonstrated by the fact that the counts of Native Americans were reasonably accurate in areas where people from this group were concentrated, but Native Americans were dramatically undercounted in city environments because of the inability of enumerators to identify them where concentrations were low (Snipp 2003). The association between location and race was also taken advantage of by brown-skinned mulattos who gave themselves Spanish surnames and then moved to areas that had a high population of Mexican Americans (Davis 1991). Understanding the relationship between race and location allows Ian F. Haney Lopez to state, “While housing patterns and citizenship have depended on race, the converse is true as well: race often follows from neighborhoods and nationality” (Lopez 1996, p. 120).

### *Race and the Legal System*

Although a significant amount of history happened within these seventy years, two significant events led to the subsuming of people of black/white backgrounds within a black racial classification: Jim Crow laws and the establishment of race as common sense. Immediately after the end of the Reconstruction period, a time when people of African heritage experienced unprecedented social, economic and political gains, white southerners created Jim Crow laws that were designed to re-subjugate black people (Davis 1991). The creation of these laws demanded a definition for who was considered black, which led to the legal institution of the “one drop rule.”

Nowhere was the creation of this rule more necessary than in the enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws, as many states tried to enforce fractional amounts of black heritage, but ultimately accepted the “one drop rule” to enforce the boundaries between the races (Hickman 2003). By instituting this rule, counting people of black/white heritage as anything other than black became superfluous, thus leading to the dropping of all multiracial categories from the U.S. Census by the year 1920 (Snipp 2003).

Although Jim Crow laws forced the legal system to reify racial categories through the “one drop rule,” when pseudo-scientific means to discern between the races began to breakdown, the court played another key role by establishing what is now the primary criteria for which the races will be based on: common sense. In his book, *White By Law*, Ian F. Haney Lopez clearly demonstrates the legal transition from understanding race as biology to understanding race as common sense. In *Ozawa v. United States*, the U.S. Supreme Court established that

Japanese were not white because the term “white persons” only pertained to people who were commonly understood as being of the Caucasian race (Lopez 1996, p. 79). However, just three months later in the case of *United States v. Thind* involving Asian Indians who are scientifically classified as Caucasian, the Court completely backed off of a scientific understanding of race and made common sense the sole criteria for judging whiteness (Ibid.). However, as will be argued later, racial common sense is also breaking down as people are becoming increasingly aware of their multiracial backgrounds, thus ushering in the need for “racial logic” to determine the race of a person.

### *Race on a Micro-level*

Ironically, the same instrument (the U.S. Census) that is largely responsible for creating a macro-level understanding of race is also responsible, to what degree is debatable, in creating the battleground regarding how race would be experienced on a micro-level. This occurred in 1960, when the Census Bureau switched from enumerators to self-identification to obtain racial statistics (Mezey 2003).

On the surface, having people self-identify their race does not seem all that significant, but in order to make this happen two ideological shifts had to occur. First, is that race was not as much about physical difference as it was about cultural affinity (Snipp 2003). But second, and most important, the common sense of race had to be socially, politically, legally and economically established well enough in our society so that race would now become a part of personal identity regardless of physical appearance. Understanding the shift from enumerators to self-identification allows us to connect how the U.S. Census became the focus of people of multiracial backgrounds and the parents of multiracial children regarding their political platform.

In 1977, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued Directive 15, which gave the U.S. Census its primary racial categories; shortly afterwards, advocacy for a multiracial category started as early as 1988 (Snipp 2003; Spencer 1999). Two groups, the Association of Multi-Ethnic Americans (AMEA) and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) took the lead regarding the creation of a multiracial category, and in 1997, partially succeeded by having the U.S. Census allow people to select more than one racial category to define their heritage (Mezey 2003).

The reason for considering the “check all that apply” configuration a partial victory was that neither group had originally advocated for a “mark all that apply” option. Although Project RACE did do substantial



foundational work regarding the combined format, they initially proposed a stand-alone multiracial category, while AMEA advocated for a separate multiracial category with racial designations (Spencer 1999). While the implications for each designation diverged on numerous levels, the unifying idea behind creating a multiracial category is that people of multiracial heritage all share a common racial experience. This assumption will be tested throughout my research as I compare and contrast the lived lives of people of Asian/white backgrounds to those of Asian/black backgrounds to see what experiences they have in common and those they do not.

An additional key assumption of these advocacy groups that will be challenged is the eventual outcome of including people of multiracial heritage on the census. Although AMEA is an advocacy group comprised of multiracial people and Project RACE is a group comprised mainly of parents of multiracial children, both groups believe, "... that a federal multiracial category will facilitate the dismantling of the American racial construct" (Ibid., p. 125). This belief is endorsed by David Hollinger who argues that multiracial people, especially those of Asian/white and Asian/black heritage, will eventually invalidate how we think of race in the United States because of our lack of history in dealing with these two groups (Hollinger 1995). However, this belief forms the foundation of another driving question of this research: Does the assertion of a multiracial identity amongst people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds actually challenge the concept of race?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Creating a theoretical framework for understanding the lived experiences of multiracial people begins with understanding their place within assimilation, the process of reducing boundaries between people from different social groups (Hwang, Saenz and Aguirre 1997), the essence of which is the formation of a unified nation unstratified and undivided by race and ethnicity (Jung 2003). Counter to the prevalent beliefs of the time that situated non-white people as unable to assimilate into the American mainstream (Fong 1971), Robert E. Park proposed a *race relations cycle* that would ultimately lead to the full incorporation of people of color: "The race relations cycle which takes the form, to state abstractly, of contacts, competition, accommodation and eventual assimilation, is apparently progressive and irreversible" (Park 1950, p. 150).

Milton Gordon furthered the race relations cycle by developing stages regarding assimilation, which addressed how to operationalize

Park's theory. Gordon proposed seven dimensions to assimilation: cultural assimilation (changing to core cultural values), structural assimilation (inclusion into primary social institutions), marital assimilation (significant intermarriage), identification assimilation (development of a sense of identity with mainstream society), attitude-receptional assimilation (absence of prejudice and stereotypes), behavior-receptional assimilation (absence of direct and indirect discrimination) and civic assimilation (absence of power conflict) (Gordon 1964). Although Parks believed assimilation to be a linear process, Gordon's conceptualization of assimilation does not necessitate that one stage must follow another, and suggests that some stages may pertain to a particular group while others may not (Hirschman 1983). Even though one stage is not dependent on another, marital assimilation is widely accepted as the culmination, the proverbial endpoint of the assimilation process (Hwang, Saenz and Aguirre 1997).

Understanding interracial marriage as the ultimate goal of assimilation makes multiracial children the living embodiment of the melting pot, where people of different ethnicities are forged together as one (Xie and Goyette 1997). However, if people of multiracial backgrounds are the endpoint of assimilation, then that should mean that they live lives that are completely integrated into mainstream America. It is this assumption that I will examine throughout my research as I analyze the lives of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds to measure the extent that they are assimilated into America.

### *How Race Affects Assimilation*

To begin the analysis of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds, it must be recognized how the pervasive voice within current multiracial discourse is subsumed within an ethnicity framework. Understanding this compels us to ask the question: Is race the same as ethnicity? If not, what could the consequences of this assumption reveal in an analysis of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds?

Ethnicity is popularly defined as a group of people that are recognized by others and by themselves as being culturally distinct (Ore 2006). However, what clearly distinguishes ethnicity and race is how they are understood socially, which can be clearly demonstrated within the assimilation process and its three possible endpoints: Anglo conformity, the melting pot and cultural pluralism (Hirschman 1983; Feagin and Feagin 1999). Anglo conformity suggests that ethnicity is something that people are willing to give up in order to become part of

the mainstream, but is race something a person can give up? The melting pot proposes that new ethnicities are absorbed and made a part of a new American ethnicity, but is race something that can be absorbed? Cultural pluralism implies that all levels of assimilation are obtained while remaining ethnic distinctions are considered equal, but can races ever be equal? Ethnicity and race both have a cultural component, but race is constructed as permanent, unabsorbable and inherently unequal. But the larger question of my research is to ask, is this true for all races?

*Except Black People*

In order to answer these questions, we must examine how racial categories are derived. It is clear that being black is defined by hyperdescent, better known in this context as the “one drop rule,” where one drop of black blood makes a person black (Davis 1991), but what about the other races?

Interestingly enough, the amount of white heritage that a person of Native American ancestry was counted on the census because there was a need to construct a boundary to being considered Native American. This was done partially, if not entirely, due to the fact that the government wanted to limit their legal obligations to this particular group:

Needless to say, hyperdescent was a convenient device for limiting the obligations from treaties and other agreements that had been incurred by the federal government throughout the preceding century. In the coming decades, the federal government would establish minimum blood quantum standards for being judged an authentic American Indian and hence being eligible for a variety of federal services, including education and health care. (Snipp 2003)

The construction of hyper-descent, the social practice of multiracial people identifying with the dominant rather than the subordinate group, among people of Native American backgrounds has directly led to people of white/Native American backgrounds having the highest probability of identifying as white in school, as compared to people of white/black and white/Asian backgrounds (Harris and Sim 2002).

This type of blood quantum rule is also found within the qualifications of the Cherry Blossom Beauty Pageants that happen in Japanese American communities, which state that a person has to be at least half Japanese in order to participate (King 2001). What this strongly suggests is that a person who is only one-quarter Japanese, with only one Asian grandparent amongst three white parents, would be

considered white by the Japanese American community. This is further supported by the fact that there is not a single legal case involving the racial classification of a person of one-quarter Asian heritage (Lopez 1996).

However, what does black hypo-descent and Native American and Asian hyper-descent mean within the assimilation process? What it suggests is that every race, except black people, can eventually shed their race by intermarrying with white people. It proposes that every race, except black people, can eventually be absorbed by the surrounding white population. And it implies that every race, except black people, can eventually become equal to whites with the right amount of white mixture. Drawing the lines around whiteness and blackness in such a manner will be a central focus of my research as I examine whether being mixed with white or black makes a difference for people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds as they experience race and the assimilation process.

### *The Multiracial Project*

By treating race as the same as ethnicity, we are unable to explain differential patterns of assimilation amongst people of different racial groups (Omi and Winant 1994; Hirschman 1983). This revelation necessitates that we move multiracial discourse out of the ethnicity paradigm and center it within the racial formations process<sup>3</sup>.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant define the concept of racial formations as, “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 55). Acknowledging this transition then locates current multiracial discourse a racial project:

... is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning. (Ibid., p. 56)

In other words, racial formations is the process in which racial projects connect social meaning to racial categories. By situating multiracial discourse as a racial project, my research will examine how racial dynamics are being reorganized around the subject of multiraciality among people of Asian/white and Asian/black

backgrounds. What will be demonstrated throughout this study is how race organizes and structures the experiences of multiracial people; how essentialist notions of race are constructed, enforced and perpetuated in their lives by themselves and society; and how race slows, if not altogether stops the assimilation process.

### *Establishing Racial Logic*

Although Omi and Winant state that racial projects connect what race means within a particular socio-historical setting, they do not create a mechanism to distinguish how racial categories are established. The racial formations process capriciously assigns unsubstantiated and implausible mental, physical, emotional and spiritual attributes to arbitrarily chosen hereditary differences that may manifest themselves culturally or physically; however, as the number of people who are aware and acknowledge their multiracial backgrounds increases, this becomes even harder to do. The differences between the races only gain meaning within the social structure of the United States during specific historical moments through the development of a racial “common sense” (Gilroy 2003; Hunt 1999; Lipsitz 1998; Lopez 1996). However, I will argue throughout my research that racial common sense is currently being rearticulated by the notion of “racial logic” as it changes our understanding of racial categories.

In his book, *White By Law*, Ian F. Haney Lopez clearly demonstrates the legal transition from understanding race as biology to understanding race as common sense. However, racial common sense is limited to presupposed meanings regarding specific monoracial categories, and is ill-equipped to handle newly acknowledged and never before encountered racial combinations presented by today’s multiracial population.

These new combinations require “racial logic” to bring together existing common sense and develop a new understanding of people of multiracial backgrounds that will affect how their attitudes, aptitudes and abilities are interpreted, rationalized and compartmentalized, which centers on reconstructing their racial categorization. For example, if black people are supposed to be athletic, while Asians are supposed to be good at math, would an Asian/black person be athletic and good at math?

Therefore, by using “racial logic,” it will be clearly demonstrated how the lived lives of the multiracial people in my sample are shaped by the institutions and organizations of society, and how their personal identity is formed along essentialist racial lines.

*Perception as Reality*

Lastly, I want to connect the Thomas theorem, which states that, “if men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928), to my analysis of the lived experiences of people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds. I have already argued that race is not a real category of any biological significance; however, it is a real category based upon its social consequences. The use of this theorem allows me to focus on how the multiracial people and the parents of multiracial children in my sample experience race without essentializing the existence of racial categories. In other words, what they believe race to be is key to understanding how race operates in their lives, which is central to my analysis.

To think of race in such a way does not privilege micro-level experiences over macro-level structures; on the contrary, it complements them. How people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds and their parents experience race in their daily lives, I will argue, form the basis of understanding how the concept of race operates on a societal level as well. Therefore, the use of this theorem allows me to develop how race is conceived, how race is socially constructed and how race is socially reproduced in the lives of multiracial people and their parents without assuming that races or racial categories exist independent of a racialized state.

It was with this framework in mind that facilitated the creation and ordering of the chapters of my research. Chapter 2: *Internal Racial Identity* will speak directly to the social processes that people are taught and use on an everyday basis in order to interpret and understand the concept of race. This chapter will focus on the seemingly ubiquitous “What are you?” question and examine its context against the actual physical appearance, social location and personal abilities of people of multiracial backgrounds. Chapter 3: *External Racial Identity* will consider the arguments of Mary Waters in her book, *Ethnic Options*, to try and ascertain whether race can be symbolic. This chapter will also discuss what factors facilitate acceptance into particular racial/ethnic/social groups, and whether this acceptance is affected by racial heritage. Chapter 4: *The External Context of Racial Identity Formation* looks into how people of Asian/white and Asian/black backgrounds experience racism in our society, and will compare the similarities and differences of being mixed with either white or black. Chapter 5: *Learning Racial Hierarchy* will seek to connect the lived lives of the parents with how their children experienced race and racism.

## **Notes**

1. I use Asian, and not Asian American, because of this study's focus upon how people of diverse racial heritage experience race; not how they negotiate their cultural identity, which is the immediate connotation of Asian American.
2. Black is admittedly acknowledged as an inherently multiracial classification, while White is considered pure and unmixed (Davis 1991; Zack 1993). Therefore, this study will include participants with multiracial Black parents who are not immediately multiracial and/or do not have a multiracial consciousness.
3. Although some would argue that the multiracial movement gains its strength to question the construction of race due to its pan-Asian construction (Hollinger 1995), which suggests that a pan-ethnicity model may be more appropriate (Spencer 1999; Espiritu 1992), I would argue that this movement's strength is actually situated in its whiteness (Parker and Song 2001), which strongly suggests a racial formations framework (Omi and Winant 1994).