

Reconfiguring Race, Rearticulating Ethnicity

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Anybody who's mixed knows they're of the black race. It's all right for some reason to say Japanese and black or Japanese and Italian or Chinese and Swedish. But the minute you say black and white. . . .

—MARIAH CAREY

According to the popular vocalist Mariah Carey (quoted in the November 1998 issue of *Vibe*), the “one-drop rule” of racial categorization defines Black-White biracial people as “Black,” whereas multiracial/multiethnic peoples of Asian descent are considered more “socially acceptable” and are therefore “permitted” the luxury of being identified as “racially mixed.” Perhaps one way of understanding Carey’s point is to note that Black-White issues loom so large in discussions of race that little about Asian-descent multiracial/multiethnic peoples is ever even addressed except as a social marker that confirms the primacy of the Black-White dichotomy.

As we enter the twenty-first century, questions of “race” that have plagued American society since its inception remain unanswered. This was vividly illustrated when, during the 2000 presidential campaign, Republican candidate George W. Bush was characterized as being racist and anti-Catholic for his failure to condemn Bob Jones University’s prohibition of interracial dating among students and its public anti-Catholic stance. However, the media attention prompted university officials to rescind its long-held ban on interracial dating, contingent upon written parental approval. During the same campaign, in Orange County, California, Bush’s Republican opponent John McCain was criticized by Asian American protestors for having referred to the Vietnamese as “gooks.” Thus as “race” increasingly informs and affects the realities of American life in more complex and multifaceted ways, the phenomenon of multiracial and multiethnic Asian Americans complicates Asian America’s relationship to the larger society and demonstrates that issues of “race” go beyond the dynamics of Black-White relations.

As part of the “millennium buzz,” Ellis Cose (2000: 42) has speculated that

the color line is fraying all around us. The American future certainly will not be circumscribed by one long line with whites on one side and the “darker” races on the other; there will be many lines, and many camps, and few will be totally segregated. Disparities will remain. But with the rudest reminders of racism washed away, it will be a lot easier to tell ourselves that we finally have overcome.

The qualitatively varied experiences of multiethnic/multiracial people simultaneously contest and reify the very structure of U.S. race relations, confirming that “race” is a sociopolitical construct, not a biologically based, scientific reality. Hence the layers of social meanings that accompany racial matters — whether during interpersonal interactions or within and across institutional arrangements — seem only to become more entangled as multiethnic/multiracial people enter the racial equation in the United States. Just as W.E.B. DuBois (1994) so insightfully predicted that the dilemma of the “color line” would dominate the twentieth century, the same issue will persist in the twenty-first century as it twists, turns, and morphs into multidimensional shapes.

Multiracial Chic

Multiracial characters, as products of vastly different and sharply contradictory worlds — whether real or fantasy, whether heroes or villains — have played symbolic roles in contouring social boundaries, drawing lines of demarcation, and differentiating “us” from “others.” From Tabitha in *Bewitched* to Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*, from Johnny Mnemonic to Voldemort in the *Harry Potter* series, from Mariah Carey to Tiger Woods, “mixed beings” have been and continue to be an iconographic source of enigma and intrigue within American popular culture.

In the 1990s multiracial Asian Americans too have found themselves as part of the American social fabric in highly conspicuous and recognizable ways. On college campuses, for example, multiracial student organizations have been formed from coast to coast. In 1999 Diana Alvarado published an article on what faculty and campus leaders need to know about multiracial students, and highlighted the concerns of several Asian-descent multiracial students. Courses on multiracial identity are now part of the curriculum on several campuses (Alvarado, 1999; Gaskins, 1999; Williams et al., 1996), and academic works on this subject proliferate (Houston & Williams, 1997; Root, 1992a, 1996; Ropp et al, 1995; Zack, 1993, 1995).

Popular magazines like *Mavin*, *Metisse Magazine*, *Interracial Voice*, *Interrace*, and *New People* have been founded to represent and promote multiracial identities and lifestyles. Major Asian American magazines and newspapers like *A.*, *Yolk*, *Asian Week*, *Hokubei Mainichi*, and *Pacific Citizen* have come to cover multiracial and “Hapa” feature stories on a regular basis, and popular writings on multiracial identity have hit the book stores in record numbers (Arboleda, 1998; Gaskins, 1999; Hara & Keller, 1999; Nash, 1999; O’Hearn, 1998). More than any other arena, popular culture has enjoyed the contribu-

tions of Asian-descent multiracials. In the early 1990s, the quintessential American hero, Superman, was portrayed by a Japanese–European American actor, Dean Cain, in the television series *Lois and Clark*. The nation wakes up every morning to Ann Curry, a Japanese–European American newswoman on NBC's top-rated *Today Show*, affectionately referred to as “America's first family.” Tiger Woods, a self-proclaimed “Cablinasian,” has been heralded as America's “golden boy” of golf after winning the Master's tournament in 1996. Brooke Lee, a Korean–Native Hawaiian–European American, was crowned Miss U.S.A. in 1997. A Filipino–European American multiracial man, Andrew Cunanan, an alleged “spree killer,” found himself on the FBI's most wanted list, taking America on a nationwide manhunt for several weeks in the summer of 1997. And the Chinese–Hawaiian–European American star Keanu Reeves has become the first multiracial Asian man to command \$20 million per film.

Journalists describe “multiracial chic” (Gaskins, 1999), writers declare 2000 the official “year of the mulatto” (Senna, 1998), and academics put forth the significance of a multiracial “critical mass” (Root, 1992a, 1996). With all of the buzzing spin on the prevalence of Asian-descent multiracial peoples in everyday American life, their demographic justification need not be made. However, we are left with the question of the social, cultural, political, and theoretical implications of their presence on the discourse encompassing Asian American identity and multiracial identity as a whole.

The Impact of Multiraciality on Asian America

The dramatic increase in intermarriage among many Asian American groups in the last three decades of the twentieth century has contributed to the instrumentalist formation and reformation of family and identity dynamics within and across Asian America (Fong, 1998; Fong & Shinagawa, 2000). As debates around the shifting significance of race continue to mount on college campuses, in the media, and across dinner tables, the impact of Asian-descent multiracial people is beginning to take hold of the public imagination.

While Asian American history has been periodized as “pre-1965” and “post-1965” migration/immigration, it is perhaps more useful to characterize Asian American history as having three periods: (1) pre–World War II, a period of antimiscegenation laws as well as interracial cohabitation, marriage, and families; (2) World War II to 1967; and (3) post-1965 immigration and the post-1967 biracial baby boom. Furthermore, U.S. government and military involvement in Asia throughout the twentieth century has produced a continuous flow of multiracial Asian American births, which comprises the largest portion of the multiracial Asian American population.

The removal of legal barriers and ideological shifts around racial constructions and locations have provided the context for growth in legal interracial marriages and multiracial families in the post–civil rights era. Indeed, for Asian Americans, social integration and open-door immigration policies have contributed to an increase in intermarriage that Joel Crohn (1995) has termed a “quiet revolution.” It has also led to

the exponential growth of the multiracial population, or what Maria P. P. Root (1992a) has called “the biracial baby boom.”

While the dramatic increase in interracial marriages and multiracial offspring is most definitely affecting all racial and ethnic communities, it is perhaps most keenly felt in Asian American communities. The U.S. Census statistics and social scientific studies for the 1990s indicate that Asian Americans are among the highest to outmarry (Fong & Yung, 1995–96; Root, 1997a; Shinagawa & Pang, 1996; Sung, 1990). On May 16, 1997, the *New York Times* reported that of the 1.5 million interracial marriages counted by the Census, 31 percent had an Asian spouse, 22 percent had a Native American or Native Alaskan spouse, and 14 percent had an African American spouse. Considering the fact that Asian Americans make up only 3 percent of the U.S. population, these statistics show their strong presence in the population of interracially married Americans. Likewise, mixed-race Asians are vastly overrepresented among multiracial young people in the United States. For example of 1,037,420 children from interracial households identified by the 1990 U.S. Census, nearly one-half (466,590) were in families where one parent is marked as “Asian” and the other parent as “White.”

Asian America has become an important sociopolitical site of racial reconfiguration and ethnic rearticulation. For example, in a third-grade classroom at a Japanese American summer school in the San Francisco Bay area, ten of the fifteen students are multiracial and multiethnic. The hair colors of these eight-year-olds range from blondy brown to black, and the eye colors from deep brown to blue. Their first, last, and middle names reflect their Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, European, and African American heritages. In this small group of children, we see the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture, and community challenged and redefined. In 1995 F. James Davis asked, “Who is Black?” In the new millennium, it is equally compelling to ask, “Who is Asian American?”

Reassessing Assimilation

Because many Asian American communities have outmarriage rates of 30–60 percent, a significant portion of the multiracial population in the United States is of Asian descent. In the Japanese American community alone, according to 1990 Census data, there were nearly 40 percent more Asian-White babies than monoracial babies with two Japanese-descent parents. The U.S. Bureau of the Census has conservatively estimated that within the next twenty-five years, “among Asian Americans, the percentage able to claim some other ancestry in addition to Asian is expected to reach 35%” (*USA Today*, September 7, 1999, p. 1). In some Asian American communities, this projection has already been surpassed. Moreover, if and when we include in these statistics of Asian-descent multiracials here in the U.S. (despite the relatively small percentage of Asian Americans—3 percent—in the overall population), those who are Asian–African American, Asian–Latino, Asian–Native American, etc., the Asian-descent multiracial numbers will expand further. Hence, examining multiraciality *in relationship to* Asian America is long overdue.

Do these demographic trends among Asian Americans suggest processes of structural assimilation? In the social sciences, questions about their linear incorporation and assimilation have dominated the discussions around intermarriage and biracial children (Kitano et al., 1984; Tinker, 1973). Underlying the issue is the binary conceptualization of what it means to be an American: one is either American or not. For Asian Americans, this dilemma has resulted in a near-perpetual foreign status in which social and legal exclusion marked their “American” experience, regardless of citizenship or generation. However, intermarriage with the dominant group, according to assimilationist views, was treated as an important indicator of structural incorporation into mainstream American society (Gordon, 1964). Thus, from this paradigmatic vantage point, multiracial/multiethnic Asian Americans, especially those with European ancestry, have been seen as fulfilling the assimilation promise of becoming a *real* (deracialized) American.

The theoretical and ideological primacy of assimilation continues to influence the articulation of ethnic (and racial) group incorporation, thereby implying that mixed-race Asian Americans are symbols of Asian American assimilation. However, those who have examined European American ethnicity (Alba, 1990; Gans, 1979; Waters, 1991; Yancey et al., 1976, 1985; Yinger, 1981) and Asian American ethnicity (Espiritu, 1992; Fugita & O’Brien, 1991) argue that irreversible, straight-line assimilation and dissipation of ethnicity have not been the sole reality (if any part of the reality) of these monoracially identified parent groups of multiracial Asian–European Americans. In addition, ‘the increasingly popular “Whiteness studies” (Allen, 1993; McIntosh, 1992; Nakayama & Martin, 1999) and examinations of peoples of color (including Asian Americans) as “racialized” populations purport that the maintenance and reemergence of ethnicity transgress assimilation in important ways. Moreover, the impact of race in the face of assimilation’s prevalence appears to heighten (rather than disappear) among monoracially identified groups (Omi & Winant, 1994; Sanjek, 1996) and among Asian-descent multiracial and multiethnic peoples, as the chapters in this volume illuminate. Thus, the notion of multiracial Asian Americans as an indicator of assimilation and racial erasure is reassessed here.

Multiracial Asian Americans Reconfiguring Race and Rearticulating Ethnicity

The essays in this anthology expound and elaborate on the processes of racial reconfiguration and ethnic rearticulation by the various Asian-descent multiracial populations across historical time periods and geographical locations. Each chapter focuses on the different aspects of the historical constructions, ethnocultural affirmations, sociopolitical negotiations, and formations of identities by these groups.

Previous writings on multiracial identity have had to argue that the subject was worthy of authentic examination (Root, 1992a, 1996; Zack, 1995; Houston & Williams, 1997; Gaskins, 1999; Hara & Keller, 1999). Questions of “Who am I?” and “What are

you?" have been the primary emphases of multiracial and multiethnic identity. They tended to explore the personal and psychological identity issues of acceptability versus rejection. Much of the research also focused on the racialized identities of multiracial and multiethnic adolescents, often in contextual and processual vacuums. While these subjects and their foci have been undoubtedly important and groundbreaking, providing a literary base and exploratory foundation for the study of multiracial and multiethnic identities in general, the maturation of the topic and the proliferation of social scientific research have allowed for a more specific, in-depth, and multidimensional examination of Asian-descent multiracial/multiethnic peoples.

This collection focuses on Asian-descent multiracial individuals, their identity formations, and their social locations within Asian America and across their multiply racialized communities in relationship to the White-majority society, issues that have often been ignored or underrepresented in the public discourse on multiraciality and race relations. It also examines the social processes by which multiracial/multiethnic people with Asian ancestry construct, negotiate, and sustain identity. To understand the complexity of multiracial identity this anthology demonstrates that the whole can indeed be greater than the sum of its parts. (See Hall and Turner, Chapter 7.) Furthermore, its major contribution to the growing literature in the field is that it moves beyond the Black-White discourse to explore multiraciality within Asian and Asian American contexts.

This ensemble of social scientific articles illuminates: 1) the complexity of this subject matter beyond personal identity issues discussed, analyzed and addressed by the vast collection of chapters; 2) multiraciality as social processes and structural arrangements; 3) the processes of multiraciality and its relationship to Asian American and Asian realities in the U.S. and abroad, and; 4) the applicability and implications of racialization and ethnic articulations for other groups through specific examinations of Asian-descent multiracial realities and identities.

Social scientific discourses have come to contest innate and primordial notions of identity by instead emphasizing the sociopolitical formations, shaped by context, condition, and agency, by which levels of identity take hold, an approach that is taken in this volume as we attempt to trace the construction and reformation of Asian American identities across multiracial/multiethnic borderlands, time periods, and cultures. The book is divided into four sections. The essays in Section I, *Multiraciality and Asian America: Bridging the Hybrid Past to the Multiracial Present*, identify multiracial/multiethnic sociohistorical themes in Asian America and provide sociohistorical contexts from which to problematize them. The chapters in Section II, *Navigating Sociocultural Terrains of Family and Identity*, examine how multiracial/multiethnic identity is informed by race, culture, gender, family relations, and generational differences and negotiated within and across various social boundaries. The writings in Section III, *Remapping Political Landscapes and Communities*, highlight some of the most important political issues and social organizations in which race, class, gender, and sexuality collide and interpenetrate, accentuating the social construction of multiracial/multiethnic identities among those of Asian ancestry and demonstrating that the notion of iden-

tity extends beyond the personal realm. And finally, the collection of essays in Section IV, Asian-Descent Multiraciality in Global Perspective, offers a comparative perspective on Asian multiracial/multiethnic communities and realities outside of the United States. Taken together, these chapters delve into the complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of multiracial/multiethnic Asian American identities and illustrate that Asian American communities are now, more than ever, critical social, cultural, and political sites wherein processes of racial reconfiguration and ethnic rearticulation are being undertaken in great part by mixed-race people.

Notes on Terminology

Names and terms are important to the self-determination and self-definition of any individual or group. For multiracial/multiethnic individuals who live within, between, and across cultural and racial borderlands (Root, 1996), how and what they name themselves (as well as how and what they are named) are of critical significance. The essays in this anthology examine how Asian American interracial families and Asian-descent multiracial individuals challenge, reinforce, reify, and/or expand boundaries of race and ethnicity among the groups in which they claim ancestry. Thus Asian Americans, as well as European Americans, African Americans and Chicano/Latino Americans are figured in the discussions that follow. A key aspect of this book is that it refuses the racist utility of racial categorization while recognizing the social realities of race and affirming the significance of ethnicity in the lives of multiracial/multiethnic Asian Americans. Each author employs different terms and labels to illuminate the sociopolitical realities of Asian-descent multiracial/multiethnic populations in their various historical, social, and geographic contexts. The attentive reader will also notice that certain spellings, accents, and styles of capitalization and hyphenation vary from one chapter to another in this volume. Given the diversity represented here, the editors did not attempt to impose consistency.

“Race” and “ethnicity” are the core concepts that weave together the subjects of this anthology. Both are defined and treated as social constructs by each author. Whereas race is discussed in reference to the sociopolitical meaning of shared genetics and gene frequencies, ethnicity is employed to recognize cultural formations, shared history, genealogical affiliations, and a perceived sense of peoplehood that may or may not exist among groups. Some authors (for example, Michael C. Thornton, Harold Gates, and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu) emphasize the concept of ethnicity over race when discussing Asians of mixed heritage, whereas others (for example, Cynthia Nakashima, Maria P. P. Root, Rebecca Chiyoko King, and Kieu Linh Caroline Valverde) mostly employ the concept of race in their analysis.

The terms “monoracial” and “monoethnic” are utilized to distinguish those who are socially identified as “unmixed,” whereas the terms “multiracial” and “biracial,” and “multiethnic” and “biethnic,” are employed to describe those who are of mixed racial and/or ethnic ancestries. Thus, ultimately, these labels are attempts at expressing personal

and social identities—how one sees oneself in relationship to others—within particular social contexts and racialized realities. When one debates who is an “Asian American,” “African American,” “Chicano/Latino,” “mixed,” “multiracial,” and “multiethnic,” one is not really talking about biological race, for a person’s identity encompasses and crisscrosses multiple social boundaries—race, phenotype, ethnicity, culture, language, age, nativity, class, gender, sexuality, temperament, occupation, family structure, and so on. Along with phenotypical and genotypical characteristics—but not conclusively—one’s racial and ethnic identity is shaped by one’s lived experiences, social arrangements, historical consciousness, generational continuity, and shared sense of peoplehood with “like others.”

The terms “multiracial Asian American” and “Asian-descent multiracials” are interchangeably used. Sometimes “biracial Asians,” “biethnic Asian Americans,” “Asian Americans of mixed heritage,” “Interracial Asian Americans,” “Amerasians,” “Eurasians,” “Afroasians,” “Hapas,” and “mestizos” are also employed. Some terms are geographically, experientially, and historically specific, while others are used more generally and broadly across regions, time periods, and ethnic/national experiences. And, as the difference in terms suggests, mixed-race peoples of Asian descent can have histories, social locations, and therefore identifications that differ from those of others with Asian ancestry as well as from those of their multiracial counterparts who are not of Asian heritage.

While we, as co-editors, do not make any distinctions between our use of the terms “multiracial Asian American” and “Asian-descent multiracials,” it is noteworthy to indicate some of the differences in identity implications each can imply. For example, one who employs “multiracial Asian American” and “multiracial Asian” (and variations such as “interracial Korean American,” and “biracial Chinese American”) to describe himself or herself is locating his or her multiracial identity within an Asian American or Asian context. By contrast, someone who utilizes “mestizo Filipino American” arguably references the mixed-race Filipino experience to Spanish colonialism and situates it within an ethnic-specific Asian (i.e., Filipino) American identity. However, a person who uses the term “Asian-descent multiracial” is likely to be centering his or her identity within his or her multiraciality, while acknowledging his or her Asian ancestry as a descriptive.

As we have seen with other groups, labels and terms are transformed through experience, political movements, and time. But for now, we hope that by putting forth common referents by which we can communicate and convey the social processes and organization of peoples who possess a multitude of social experiences, we will assist readers in framing our discussion on multiracial/multiethnic peoples of Asian descent.