

MULTIRACIAL EXPERIENCES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*Contesting Knowledge, Honoring Voice, and
Innovating Practice*



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INSIGHTS ON MULTIRACIAL KNOWLEDGE, VOICES, AND PRACTICES

Lessons From Our Lives and Work

Charmaine L. Wijeyesinghe and Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero

From the preceding material, readers know we draw on words such as *complex* and *diverse* when describing Multiracial people in higher education, *contested* and *racialized* when referring to higher education spaces and sites of knowledge and *innovative* and *revolutionary* when describing the potential of Multiracial lives to transform colleges and universities. Just as the preface noted that the different grammatical styles and forms that appear in the chapters of this book were not employed accidentally, the actual words we and the contributors use reflect purposeful choices. Those choices highlight issues of power, politics, legacy, and possibilities inherent in capturing the experiences of a very diverse group of marginalized people within one of the oldest structures and systems in the United States.

In this chapter, we continue to reflect on some of the topics briefly described in the “Additional Notes to Reader” section of the preface, illustrating the complexities of definitions, categories, and assumptions about identity and belonging, as well as expectations of what is considered real and valued knowledge in the academy. Like the range of perspectives and voices in this volume, we blend types of knowledge here. We begin by sharing stories of our own lives as Multiracial people in higher education. Next we investigate themes that were evident in our narratives and that find space in various chapters in this book, augmenting our analysis with statistics and brief notations of material that readers might refer to for additional insight. Because subsequent chapters provide in-depth literature reviews and

significant reference lists, our goal here is to balance presentation of contextual information with efforts to avoid repetition.

Our Personal Stories

In this section of the chapter we offer parts of our own stories of navigating higher education, paths we took to our work on Multiracial topics, and the lessons we learned from these journeys. Because we attended college and worked in higher education in different eras, these stories illustrate the dynamic nature of concepts, institutions, and options for Multiracial people.

Charmaine

In the realm of Multiracial scholarship I've shifted my generational location—from a doctoral candidate searching the (then) limited literature on which to build a study of Multiracial identity and convincing senior scholars that this topic was legitimate and worthy of study to a thinker in her later years who is inspired by the insights of current scholars and practitioners investigating many facets of Multiracial lives. My journey to this point has been neither straight nor planned, much like the path to my identity as a Multiracial person.

My racial identity has changed across the over 6 decades of my life. Looking back, I can't say that I thought about identity, racial or otherwise, until I was in my 20s. That's not to say that now familiar themes from the literature on Multiracial people were absent from my childhood. My family was an anomaly, with my parents and two older siblings immigrating to the United States from Sri Lanka and settling in a suburban, all-White community north of Boston in 1958. My mother was of Dutch/Portuguese ancestry and my father was Dutch/Sri Lankan. She was thought of as White in the United States and he was definitely Brown. About a month after they arrived, I became the first American citizen through birth in my family. I am not sure about my siblings, but as I got older I was constantly asked, "What are you," and was told by my parents that the response to this question was "an American," though I had a nagging sense there was something about my family and me that didn't quite make me "American" in the eyes of our immediate community. Our food, family values, unpronounceable-by-others last name, and range of physical appearances made us different. In the 1960s and 1970s differences based on race were largely couched in terms of Black and White, and I believe people thought I was Black. I think most people meeting me today do the same. And although I could relay many more stories, given the focus of this book, I turn to identity as I experienced it in higher education.

My environment became much more diverse when I enrolled as an undergraduate at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1976. Because of my brown complexion and tight curls, most people assumed I was Black, including the Black students who routinely asked me to join the Black Student Union. I sometimes corrected people, telling them that I was Asian and White, but mostly understood that how I was perceived was how I was labeled. By the time I was a senior, however, several African American staff women were part of my life. I wanted to be like them—confident, assertive, sure of who they were. I began to see that for all intents and purposes, my experiences reflected those of a Black woman, so I thought of myself as Black. Occasionally I encountered situations where I needed to specify my family background. For example, when I became a professional staff member at the university, one of the highest level administrators on campus asked me why I had marked “C” (for Asian) instead of “B” (for Black) on my employment form. In the 1970s and early 1980s, people didn’t have the same curiosity they have today with determining whether someone is “mixed.” No one would have asked me if I was Multiracial when I was in college. As I moved toward graduate school, race and identity were still in the background of my consciousness, but starting to percolate.

During graduate school at UMass I was still considered Black by just about everyone, and identifying as Black was mostly a matter of convenience. Once enrolled in the doctoral program I began studying foundational literature on social justice, racial identity, and group dynamics. I had incredible opportunities, taking classes with Bailey Jackson, Rita Hardiman, Ken Blanchard, and faculty associated with the National Training Labs (NTL). I once sat within arm’s reach of our guest lecturer Paulo Freire. I began to think of myself as a theorist but I didn’t apply the material, often, to myself. When I did ask which of the theories of racial identity—Black (Jackson) or White (Hardiman)—applied to me, I was promptly told I’d fall under the Black one.

As I went through graduate school, I embraced racial identity models and the stage paradigm they adopted. I applied this material in diversity-related work that I did for a consulting collective in the area. Even there my appearance, experiences, and identity had to be negotiated. For example, it was not uncommon for clients to request a Black consultant as part of the team working with their institutions. My colleagues and I often discussed whether I could be that person, and more than once I was. I encountered more dilemmas when language evolved and folks began using the term African American instead of Black. Although I mostly identified with the broader category of Black, it was inauthentic and just plain wrong for me to identify as African American.

In mulling a dissertation topic, I noted a proverbial gap in the literature. There was no mention of Multiracial people in the material we studied. Given the tradition of stage models produced at UMass, I—let me repeat, I—was supposed to create *the* stage model on Multiracial identity. I was crushed, momentarily, when the biracial models by Poston and Kich were published. Luckily, I found that the experiences that my research participants shared during their interviews did not fit a stage model structure. Instead, certain factors influenced their choices of identity. Even after defending the dissertation, I did not reflect on how “the findings” applied to me. However, one of the postdefense tasks was registering the dissertation in a national database using a paper form, a section of which contained demographic questions about the author, including an item pertaining to race. I checked the boxes for Asian and for White—for the first time and in honor of the people who shared their stories in my research. The paper form was returned to me with a request to include correct information on race. In 1992, checking one box was the only option allowed. After I submitted the form two additional times (it was returned twice) with two boxes marked for race, the form stopped being sent back to me.

I continued to consult on issues of social justice and identity, and built a career in higher education and in the not-for-profit sector. In addition to utilizing stage models I offered my “factor-based” work, not realizing that it was part of a growing number of ecological models. My conference sessions were packed, because there were few people speaking about Multiracial identity in the 1990s and at least some higher education faculty and staff noticed the need for information. However, I always had a good number of monoracial parents of Multiracial kids in the sessions. Everyone was hungry for some knowledge, some space to discuss questions and issues.

Almost 2 decades after my defense, I encountered Susan Jones, a professor at Ohio State, at a conference. From Susan’s work and knowledge, I became more interested in the idea of intersectionality and how it could help me capture the complex interrelationship between factors and racial identity. A collaboration and new area of interest emerged. Susan and I have gone on to present sessions and write book chapters together. It has been a rewarding, supportive, and invigorating relationship. Through our collaborative work, I’ve been jostled from my allegiance to stage models and from my allegiance to models at all.

Over the last decade I’ve focused on larger issues that create the context, knowledge, and questions related to identity, race, and, by consequence, Multiracial people. I value the unknown much more than I ever did in my earlier years. I am fascinated by the questions that help me discern what I know, how I know it, and what I have yet to know. In addition, I am

drawn to wrestling with the nature of knowledge itself. What counts as legitimate knowledge, what does not, and who gets to decide? I now understand more deeply that what I believe about identity reflects the theories I've been exposed to, the research and teaching I've done, the interactions I've had, my experiences of the world in light of my social identities and positions, and the many systems of inequality that have influenced everything from the start. I am challenged to bring this awareness to my work on identity and Multiracial people and I relish the opportunities this book has provided for me to embrace these challenges.

Marc

I am a multiracial (Filipino and white) man, who recognizes my ancestries go way deeper than these categories actually capture. Born in Pangasinan, Philippines, my mom immigrated to the United States in the early 1970s as part of a large wave of nurses and other health care workers. My dad traces his roots to German American farmers in Wisconsin, though he knows that his heritage is also made up of Scottish and French ancestry and *not* Native American (I grew up hearing those false yet common stories that I had a great, great grandmother who was a “Cherokee Princess” and believed it until undergrad when the president of the North American Indigenous Student Organization [NAISO] schooled me on it being one of the biggest myths in Indian Country). During my childhood years growing up in suburban Michigan during the 1980s and 1990s, I didn't have any identity “issues” until other people pointed out that I was different. From the children on our block making fun of my siblings and me for referring to our parents as “Nanay” and “Tatay” (*Mom* and *Dad* in Tagalog, which we stopped using shortly after this teasing) to friends on my high school rowing team thinking I was adopted because I didn't seem to match my white father's skin tone, my Multiracial identity only became salient because of the monoracist system in place that continuously pointed out that I was different. Of course I didn't have that language back then, but I am able to articulate those experiences now.

My work in multiracial advocacy began while I was an undergraduate student at Michigan State University, where in 2001–2002, I founded our “Hapa” club (before I knew the contested nature of the term, which I no longer use as I do not wish to perpetuate the coopting/stealing of Native Hawaiian language). My rationale was to create a space for Asian American students of mixed heritage to come together and share experiences and build community. The Asian connection felt important because mentors at the institution passed down history lessons to me that there was a previous multiracial student group at the institution that disbanded due to distinctions

between needs of leadership and members, particularly around those who were multiracial Black or not-Black. I felt if we all had some connection to Asian Americanness, that might give our group a better chance at being sustained, not to mention having access to the pan-Asian American associations' resources as an "affiliate group." Little did I know that just a few years after I graduated, this Hapa group would also dissolve.

After several years of working in student affairs and, in particular, multicultural affairs, I felt I had established myself as an advocate for multiracial college students and for infusing multiracial issues into the larger discourse on racial diversity in our practice. I felt confident in who I was and really did feel like my mixed race background allowed me to view problems from multiple perspectives and bridge different communities. This optimistic outlook was disrupted by attending an institute on the increasingly prominent "intergroup dialogues" as a pedagogical and programmatic tool toward educating students to better understand diversity and social justice. I was reminded constantly that I didn't have a "group" to have "intergroup" dialogues with. Worse yet, I was silenced by fellow participants and trainers who did not care to infuse multiraciality into their model, because they had "proven" that their model worked (for monoracial groups).

That experience reminded me of what life might be like for current multiracial college students who are navigating campuses that weren't designed with them in mind. While a master's student and full-time academic adviser on campus, I advised a new student organization focused on the mixed race student experience (aptly named the Multiracial Identity eXperience, or "the MIX"). On this campus, there were four established panracial/ethnic groups (e.g., Asian Pacific American Student Association, Black Student Alliance, Culturas de las Razas Unidas, and NAISO) that had fought for many years to secure funding to support these underrepresented populations. When the MIX began, tensions arose over the organization's desire to join a governing body with the other (mono)racial groups. There were suspicions as to why the MIX members could not integrate into the monoracial groups and how its presence might affect the funding available to all groups. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this was about resources and representations; the established groups were worried about losing their share of the small piece of pie they had fought for from the predominantly white institution. It is true that these monoracial groups had a long history of advocating for self-determination, yet in their fight for a more inclusive campus, they were unintentionally (I would like to hope) excluding other marginalized groups—those who didn't fit monoracial categories. Did these established groups not see a benefit in increasing the number of students they could build coalitions with? What happened to strength in numbers? What may have been operating was a feeling that if they

(multiracial students) couldn't identify as a part of our (mono)racial group, then they should not benefit from our past fight for resources.

These experiences as an undergraduate student, graduate student, and practitioner continue to inform the work that I do now as a faculty member in trying to better understand the dynamics of Multiracial identity and monoracism through research, teaching, and service. I owe so much of my career to one of my graduate school professors, Kristen A. Renn, who literally wrote the book on *Mixed Race Students in College* (SUNY Press, 2004). Kris opened my eyes to the possibility of becoming a scholar and that my life and experience were worthy of being studied. It was also in her student development theory course during my master's program where my experiences became grounded in a larger context and opened my mind to so many other questions—questions that would continue to propel me in this work and my desire to inspire and provide opportunities for future generations of Multiracial scholars and practitioners, like Kris and other mentors (e.g., Kevin Nadal, Rudy Guevarra, Donna Talbot, John Lee) did for me.

Yet I still sometimes struggle with feelings of doubt around the importance of my research topics, particularly those that center my own identities and experiences around multiraciality (not to mention the devastating events highlighting the continued necessity for the Black Lives Matter movement). Those feelings made me decide not to do my dissertation research on multiraciality, opting instead to more broadly explore racial conceptions. I had fears of becoming pigeonholed such that I would only be known for doing multiracial-focused research. In fact, for one of my dissertation studies, I openly excluded multiracial students—engaging in the type of multiracial erasure I would later critique. It is my hope that through this volume I am contributing to the creation of spaces and building of community where emerging and future multiracial scholars (both those who identify as such or are interested in studying multiraciality) do not have the same fears and doubts that I had, toward a future where multiracial faculty, staff, and students can all thrive in higher education.

Interlude and Moving On

Our voices take a more analytical tone in the next section. Before moving on, we invite readers to sit with our stories, to be still with them, and to consider their knowledge contributions without evaluating or analyzing them. Briefly notice how your body and mind are reacting. After a period of time, rejoin us here.

Embedded within our stories are themes such as how appearance affects naming and sense of belonging or ways programs and systems silence or negate Multiracial experiences. Multiracial readers may connect with aspects

of our stories, even if they differ in background, age, and so on from us. For the rest of the chapter we focus on five areas that appear in the narratives and resonate throughout the book.

Guiding Themes and Supplemental Information

Chapters in this book use theories, narratives, and applied strategies to highlight the diverse ways that Multiracial students, faculty, and staff navigate campus life. As we noted in the preface, there are so many topics, areas, and themes reflected across the spectrum of Multiracial lives in higher education. Due to limitations of space, we have chosen to discuss five in this section. Although these topics have received attention in previous works on or related to Multiracial experiences, our goal here is to provide readers with some—not all—material to augment ideas and information that appear in the chapters that follow. We also note connections between areas discussed here and specific chapters in the book.

Definitions of Multiraciality and Complexities of Language

When reading this volume, a logical, first question to ask might be “Who are Multiracial people in higher education?” The answer to this question varies based on paradigmatic approaches to identity (see Wijeyesinghe, chapter 3) and data collection and reporting decisions (see Renn, chapter 2), which reflect larger issues and limitations of language and terminology. Are Multiracial people only those individuals who identify as Multiracial? Or is Multiracial identity based on one’s background or ancestry (which opens up critiques of biological and genetic essentialism)? Throughout this volume, readers will encounter narratives from people who might be considered Multiracial in terms of background, but who identify monoracially (see Alexander, chapter 8; Davis, chapter 5).

Identity labels are both personal and political. For instance, despite the interchangeable use of terms like *biracial*, *Multiracial*, and *mixed race* in common discourse, we know that these words have their own meanings and may be contested in different spaces and for different people. Individuals and groups often have strong rationales for the specific language they use to name themselves and others who align with shared histories and struggles. Some terms and naming conventions might even be specific to individual families or may look different depending on audience. Thus, we have offered a more inclusive definition of Multiracial people in the preface to describe the population we focus on in this book—namely, anyone who claims heritage

and membership in two or more (mono)racial groups and/or identifies with Multiracial identity terms, such as the broader *biracial*, *multiethnic*, and *mixed*, or more specific terms like *Blasian* and *Mexipino*. Yet we know the definition we adopted for this book still may not capture everyone who identifies with Multiracial experiences, including transracial adoptees (see Combs & Ashlee, 2020). Such broad conceptualizing of multiraciality (a noun used to signify anything related to Multiracial topics) might be open to critique since there is extensive diversity within this category, resulting in very different expressions and experiences of identity. As some authors have argued (e.g., Hamako, 2014), what unites Multiracial people is not necessarily how they identify (i.e., which box or boxes they check or terms they claim) but how they have to navigate monoracism (see Harris et al., chapter 4).

Multiracial People in Higher Education by the Numbers

Despite the limitations in language and terminology, U.S. higher education generally uses the lens of racial self-identification through “box-checking” to identify those who marked “Two or More Races” as Multiracial. U.S. Census data from 2010 reported that 2.9% of the population (over 9 million people) self-identified with two or more races (Jones & Bullock, 2012). However, the Pew Research Center (2015) has estimated that the Multiracial population may be closer to 6.9% when accounting for parent/grandparent race. With these differences in mind, the following selected statistics on Multiracial people in higher education from *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report* (Espinosa et al., 2019) and *The Condition of Education* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) will help to contextualize the volume:

- In fall 2018, 16.6 million undergraduates were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions; approximately 647,000 students (3.9%) were two or more races.
- Among all undergraduates enrolled during 2015–16, the percentage of women (56.5%) was higher than men (43.5%); this gap was higher for students of more than one race (women at 59.4% and men at 40.6%).
- During the 2015–16 academic year, undergraduates checking more than one box to indicate race attended a range of institutions, including public 4-year (33.8%), private nonprofit 4-year (13.8%), public 2-year (44.8%), and for-profit (7.5%).
- In fall 2018, there were approximately 3 million postbaccalaureate degree program students (i.e., graduate students); approximately 81,300 students (2.7%) were of two or more races.

- During the 2015–16 academic year, graduate students of more than one race attended a range of institutions, including public 4-year (45.8%), private nonprofit 4-year (39.7%), and for-profit (14.4%); for-profit enrollment outpaced the 10.3% enrollment for graduate students overall.
- In 2016, across all levels of educational attainment, adults (age 25 or older) of more than one race earned less than the national median for all adults; those with a professional degree earned \$15,000 less than the national median for adults with professional degrees.
- In fall 2016, people who marked more than one race made up 0.9% of total full-time faculty; of all these faculty, 32.5% held positions as instructors, lecturers, or in faculty positions with no academic rank (compared to 26.7% overall).
- In fall 2016, college presidents were predominantly white (91.9%), with individuals of more than one race comprising 1.4% of all college presidents.

As evidenced in these statistics, the numbers don't tell the whole story; highlighted here is a sample of the contested landscape regarding naming ("two or more races" or "more than one race" may not equal "Multiracial"). Statistics on Multiracial professional staff were not even mentioned. This erasure is just one way Multiracial people might feel included or excluded as they navigate higher education settings.

Issues and Forces Affecting Inclusion and Exclusion

Even with the contested nature of counting and naming, the increasing presence and visibility of Multiracial people across higher education is clear. As Renn (chapter 2) points out and the narratives in this volume embody, there is likely a reciprocal relationship among Multiracial students claiming space, Multiracial staff offering support programs and services, and Multiracial faculty developing research and curriculum, each building off one another to improve Multiracial experiences in higher education. Multiracial student organizations may experience tensions (Davis, chapter 5; Mohajeri & Lou, chapter 13) or turnover, but they still offer important spaces for engagement and leadership development. Often, students themselves are driving educational efforts like Multiracial Heritage Months or Loving Day events (Kaya, chapter 9). Multiracial staff are increasingly finding support networks and professional development through outlets such as the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity (NCORE) and affinity groups within professional associations such as the MultiRacial Network of the American

College Personnel Association (ACPA) (Malaney Brown, chapter 6) and the MultiRacial Knowledge Community of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Multiracial faculty (especially those who study multiraciality) are finding outlets like the Critical Mixed Race Studies Association (CMRSA; www.criticalmixedracestudies.com) and its *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* and conferences to legitimize their scholarship. And now, even academic programs (Leopardo et al., chapter 14) are validating multiraciality within the academy.

Yet alongside increasing inclusion are forces and factors still fostering the marginalization and erasure of Multiracial people in higher education. The limitations and confusion around language and naming point to one area contributing to some people with Multiracial identities feeling seen or unseen. As several chapters in the volume point to (e.g., Guillermo-Wann & Johnston-Guerrero, chapter 11; Harris et al., chapter 4), these forces stem from larger oppressive structures and systems. These systems have long and winding roots. Thus, the importance of grounding our current understandings in the historical legacies related to exclusion (e.g., slavery, settler colonialism and genocide, imperialism, antimiscegenation laws, rules of hypodescent and blood quantum) cannot be understated as we look to the future.

Sites of Experience

Multiracial people encounter inclusion, exclusion, affirmation, and challenges in many locations within higher education. Several contributors to this volume identify multiple sites that affect personal perceptions of self, belonging, rejection, and resilience, including all of the contributors of the narratives offered in chapters 5–10. In addition, Mohajeri and Lou (chapter 13) discuss how student organizations can be improved through reflection, increased awareness, and intentional work of advisers. Enhancing the inclusion of Multiracial people also entails creating new sites for examining, affirming, and nurturing individuals. The Multiracial Aikido retreat featured in chapter 12 by Martinez and Shippen represents one of these innovations. Moving to the future, researchers, scholars, and practitioners are encouraged to look beyond the locations closest to an individual and to consider how larger systems and institutional structures affect outcomes for Multiracial students (Harris et al., chapter 4; Kellogg & Niskodé, 2008) and the overall climate of inclusion of Multiracial people (Guillermo-Wann & Johnston-Guerrero, chapter 11).

Most of the scholarship on Multiracial people in higher education has focused on students, but some of that research bears relevance to faculty and staff. The complex interwoven nature of these systems is evident in the

narratives of faculty (Jolivette, chapter 10, Kaya, chapter 9) and staff (alexander, chapter 8; Malaney Brown, chapter 6). The insights provided by these contributors complement scholarship on Multiracial faculty by Harris (e.g., 2019) and Cuyjet (2008), as well as on related topics such as curriculum and teaching methods (Williams et al., 1996). In addition, chapter 14 in this volume (Leopardo et al) illustrates responses of members of the academic community to Multiracial faculty's efforts to develop a minor on mixed race studies.

Strategies for Surviving and Thriving

Throughout this book, contributors describe multiple strategies that they have utilized to support themselves or other Multiracial people at their institutions. We have chosen to end this chapter by recounting some of those strategies because they reflect the creativity, resilience, and service of individuals who find and offer strength, community, and wisdom within institutions that are largely ill prepared to welcome and affirm them as full members of the campus community. Although we believe this list does not detract from the words and experiences of the contributors who follow, we do hope that it makes readers even more eager to read the analyses, narratives, and practices provided in the next chapters. Some of the strategies contributors to this book have used include the following:

- Found faculty and staff mentors who can support and encourage self-exploration and who can assist in skill and academic development; became a mentor for other Multiracial people.
- Engaged in spaces that made room for Multiracial people, which can include campus-based organizations, local community groups, and national-level organizations such as CMRSA.
- Sought out opportunities to build coalitions with other organizations and people; helped organizations and coalitions develop orientations and activities to further racial justice, for Multiracial people, other people of color, and related targeted groups.
- Created opportunities for individuals to explore issues of identity, self-care, and navigating campus life; engaged in this critical work personally and continually to be a role model and to remain prepared to help others.
- Took, developed, and offered courses and educational programs related to Multiracial topics.
- Identified and critiqued knowledge and practices that excluded or contested Multiracial experiences; disseminated new knowledge through research or presentations.

- Advocated for the inclusion of Multiracial people in programs offering benefits such as scholarships, internships, or conference programs.
- Stayed connected to family and community.

Synthesis

As readers will find within the chapters that follow, higher education is a site of discourse, analysis, and knowledge building for subjects that create the contexts in which Multiracial lives are understood, questioned, researched, contested, embraced, and experienced. Almost every aspect of those contexts shifts over time in response to political advocacy and action, evolving cultural and political forces, and through insights gained from research and practice. Hence, they require constant assessment and consideration through the knowledge, voices, and practices offered by this book, and in similar volumes that will be produced in the years that follow.

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