

A Post-Racial America? Multiracial Identification and the Color Line in the 21st Century

JENNIFER LEE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

INTRODUCTION

The United States is more racially diverse than at any point in history. Once a largely black-white society with a distinct color line separating these two groups, the country has moved far beyond black and white due to contemporary immigration. Today, immigrants and their children comprise almost 66 million people, or about 23% of the U. S. population, but unlike the earlier waves of immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America's recent newcomers have been mainly non-European, with 85% originating from Latin America, Asia, or the Caribbean (Lee and Bean 2004; U. S. Bureau of Census 2002; U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2002). The shift in national origins—from Europe to Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean—is the single most distinctive feature of the “new immigration” in the United States (Bean and Stevens 2003; Waldinger and Lee 2001).

America's immigrant newcomers have undeniably altered the racial landscape of the United States. In 1970, Latinos and Asians comprised only 5% and 1% of the U. S. population, but today, they account for 13% and 4%, respectively. The Latino population has grown so rapidly that Latinos now outnumber blacks, and have become the nation's largest minority group in the United States. While smaller in size, the Asian population is the fastest growing group in the country (Lee and Zhou 2004). America's Latino and Asian populations are expected to continue to grow so that by 2050, they are projected to constitute 30% and 8% of the U. S. population. Clearly, today's immigrants have transformed the United States from a largely black-white society to a newly multi-racial one.

Along with the new immigration, other changes have also increased the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States, most notably, the rise in intermarriage and the growth of the multiracial population. Intermarriage—marriage between members of different U. S. racial groups—soared more than twenty-fold over a forty-year period, from 150,000 marriages in 1960 to 3.1 million in 2000 (Jacoby 2001; Lee and Edmonston 2005). The dramatic increase in interracial marriage is due, in large part, to the 1967 ruling Loving v. Virginia, in which the U. S.

Supreme Court overturned the country's remaining anti-miscegenation laws. At that time, there were still sixteen states in the country in which interracial marriage was illegal. Today, 6.4% of Americans are interracially married.

The rise in intermarriage has contributed to the growth of the multiracial population, which became highly visible when, for the first time in U. S. history, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to mark more than one race to identify themselves (See Figure 1). This meant that a person with a black father and white mother could mark both black and white on the census form to identify themselves, rather than black or white. It also meant that someone with a white father and a Japanese mother could identify as both white and Japanese, rather than having to choose one or the other. The option to mark more than one race is particularly significant because it gives official status and recognition to Americans who consider their backgrounds as racially mixed—an acknowledgement that speaks volumes about how far race relations have evolved in the United States since the days of the legally enforced “one-drop rule” of hypodescent. In 2000, 2.4% of the U. S. population identified as multiracial, accounting for one in forty Americans. By the year 2050, demographers estimate that this ratio could soar to one in five, and by 2100, to one in three Americans.

Each of these phenomena—the new immigration, the rise in interracial marriage, and the growing multiracial population—has increased the racial and ethnic diversity in the United States, and has led social scientists to question whether the black-white color line that once described race relations in the United States is now disappearing altogether or whether a new divide is emerging. Given that today's immigrants from Latin America and Asia are neither black nor white, a pressing question for scholars who study race and immigration in American Studies is: are today's newest nonwhite immigrant groups following in the footsteps of their European immigrant predecessors, or are Asians and Latinos racialized minorities whose experiences are more akin to those of African Americans? In short, do Asians and Latinos more closely resemble whites or blacks in the United States at this point in time? The answers to these questions will help to reveal whether the black-white color line of the past is disappearing altogether, whether it is morphing into a white-nonwhite divide, or evolving into a black-nonblack divide. In short, where (if at all) will the color line be drawn in the 21st century?

In this paper, I use patterns of multiracial identification as the analytical lens by which I gauge the placement of the contemporary color line in the United States. Multiracial identification speaks volumes about the meaning of race in American society, and in particular, signals where racial group boundaries are fading most rapidly and where they continue to endure. Multiracial reporting is a significant harbinger of racial change because the willingness of an individual to identify in multiracial terms reflects a jettisoning of the exclusive bases of racial categorization that have long marked the construction of race in the United States. It also reflects the diminishing significance of the current American racial

→ **NOTE: Please answer BOTH Questions 5 and 6.**

5 **Is this person Spanish/Hispanic/Latino?** Mark the "No" box if **not** Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.

No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino

Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

Yes, Puerto Rican

Yes, Cuban

Yes, other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino — *Print group.* ↗

6 **What is this person's race?** Mark **one or more races** to indicate what this person considers himself/herself to be.

White

Black, African Am., or Negro

American Indian or Alaska Native — *Print name of enrolled or principal tribe.* ↗

<input type="checkbox"/> Asian Indian	<input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian
<input type="checkbox"/> Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/> Guamanian or Chamorro
<input type="checkbox"/> Filipino	<input type="checkbox"/> Samoan
<input type="checkbox"/> Japanese	<input type="checkbox"/> Other Pacific Islander — <i>Print race.</i> ↗
<input type="checkbox"/> Korean	
<input type="checkbox"/> Vietnamese	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian — <i>Print race.</i> ↗	

Some other race — *Print race.* ↗

Figure 1. The Ethnicity and Race Questions from the 2000 Census Form.

scheme, which some sociologists believe will become increasingly less relevant in each generation until it disappears into obscurity.

THEORY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

A White-Nonwhite Divide

Some scholars believe that America's new color line will fall along white-nonwhite lines, with Asians and Latinos falling on the nonwhite side of the divide, largely because this divide has been enforced throughout the history of the United States. For example, in 1924, Virginia passed a Racial Integrity Law that created two distinct categories: "pure" white and all others. The statute defined a "white" person as one with "no trace whatsoever of blood other than Caucasian," and emerged to legally ban intermarriage between whites and other groups.

The statute reflected the Supreme Court rulings of Takao Ozawa v. United States in 1922 and the United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind in 1923, in which persons of Asian origin were not only classified as nonwhite, but were also considered ineligible for U. S. citizenship. In the first case, Takao Ozawa (a Japanese citizen of the United States) filed for U. S. citizenship under the Naturalization Act of June 29, 1906 which allowed whites and persons of African descent or nativity to naturalize. Japanese-born, but raised and educated in the United States, Ozawa filed for U. S. citizenship based on the argument that his skin color made him a "white person." Rather than challenging the constitutionality of the racial restrictions to U. S. citizenship, Ozawa attempted to have Japanese persons classified as "white." In Ozawa's case, the Court ruled that color was not a sufficient basis for race, and concluded that only Caucasians were white. Because the Japanese were not of the Caucasian race, they were not white, but rather, members of an "unassimilable race," and therefore, ineligible for citizenship.

Three months later, in United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923), the Supreme Court handed down a similar ruling, denying citizenship to a "high class Hindu" from India. Despite the fact that anthropologists had defined members of the Indian subcontinent as members of the Caucasian race, the Court dismissed anthropological evidence in Thind's case. While the Court did not dispute that Thind was a Caucasian, it ruled that not all Caucasians were white, as "used in common speech, to be interpreted in accordance with the understanding of the common man." While Ozawa was denied citizenship because he was not of the Caucasian race, and therefore not white, Thind was denied citizenship because he was not white according to the common understanding of whiteness, even though the court conceded that he was Caucasian. Both rulings reflected the idea that persons of Asian origin were not only a distinct racial or color category from whites, but also "racially unassimilable and unalterably foreign" (Ngai 2004).

The question of "unassimilability" has come up yet again for today's immigrants. Harvard scholars Samuel P. Huntington (2004) and George J. Borjas

(1999) point to Mexican immigrants, in particular, as potentially unassimilable because many arrive with such low levels of education and often as illegal immigrants. For example, 11% of Mexican-born adults in the United States have no formal education, and another 60% have not completed high school. The comparable figures for the U. S. adult population are 1% and 18%, respectively. Compounding their low levels of human capital is their legal status. About half of all foreign-born Mexicans in the United States entered the country illegally, and among the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country, nearly three-quarters are from Mexico (U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2003). Huntington and Borjas fear that Mexicans—who comprise 30% of the U. S. immigrants—will become mired in the bottom rungs of America’s economic structure, and may form a new urban underclass.

Other immigration scholars, such as Alejandro Portes and his colleagues (2005: 1006), point to other disadvantages that today’s immigrants and their children face, in particular, their racial and ethnic distinctiveness, as they note,

“Children of Asian, black, mulatto, and meztizo immigrants cannot escape their ethnicity and race, as defined by the mainstream. Their enduring physical differences from whites and the equally persistent strong effects of discrimination based on those differences, especially against black persons, throws a barrier in the path of occupational mobility and social acceptance.”

Portes and his colleagues suggest that today’s immigrants and their children will perceive themselves and will be perceived by others as disadvantaged and racialized minorities, who are closer to blacks than to whites.

In light of these disadvantages, some scholars point to the possible emergence of a white-nonwhite divide, in which Asians and Latinos fall closer to blacks than to whites. If this is the case, we would expect that the patterns of and experiences with multiracial identification would be similar among Asians, Latinos, and blacks.

A Black-Nonblack Divide

In the 1990’s, social scientists began to notice the possible emergence of a new racial structure that differed from both the black-white and white-nonwhite divides. What appeared to be forming was a black-nonblack divide (Alba 1990; Gitlin 1995; Gans 1999; Sanjek 1994). The concept of the black-nonblack divide surfaced in conjunction with a flurry of research that documented the processes by which previously “nonwhite” immigrant ethnic groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Eastern European Jews became “white” (Alba 1990, 1985; Brodtkin 1998; Gerstle 1999; Igantiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991).

For example, Noel Ignatiev (1995) details how Irish immigrants achieved “whiteness” by shifting their political alliance, attaining economic mobility, and adopting deliberate, extreme, and often violent measures to distance themselves from African Americans. With economic mobility, in particular, came the de-

coupling of national origin differences as “racial” differences, contributing to the development of the idea that for Irish immigrants (and other European immigrants), whiteness was an achieved rather than an ascribed status (Alba 1990; Haney-Lopez 1996; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997; Waters 1990). In other words, as economic and cultural differences diminished and eventually faded between white and nonwhite immigrants groups, the Irish, Italians, and Eastern European Jews became racially reconstructed and redefined as white.

Researchers have also shown that European immigrants are not the only groups to have changed their status from nonwhite to white. Asian ethnic immigrant groups such as the Chinese in Mississippi also changed their racial status from almost black to almost white (Loewen 1971). By illustration, when Chinese immigrants first arrived in Mississippi—a region of the country that was strictly black and white—Mississippi whites and blacks viewed them as closer to blacks than to whites. They resided in black neighborhoods, their children attended black schools, and some Chinese immigrants and blacks intermarried.

However, it did not take Chinese immigrants long to understand that in order to achieve social mobility, they would need to actively change their lowly racial status. They effectively did this by achieving economic mobility, emulating the cultural practices and institutions of whites, intentionally distancing themselves from blacks, and rejecting fellow ethnics who married blacks as well as their Chinese-black multiracial children. By closely following the moral codes laid out by the whites in Mississippi, the Chinese accepted rather than challenged the existing racial hierarchy and essentially crossed over the black-white color line. In the process, they changed their racial status from almost black to almost white.

While immigrant groups have changed their status from nonwhite to white or almost white, African Americans have not been able to do the same. Sociologist Herbert Gans (2005: 19–20) refers to this as the pattern of African American exceptionalism. He elaborates, “The only population whose racial features are not automatically perceived differently with upward mobility are African Americans: Those who are affluent and well educated remain as visibly black to whites as before...” Jonathan Warren and France Winddance Twine (1997: 208) posit that this is because blackness has been constructed as the racialized “other” against which whiteness is defined. They write:

“[B]ecause Blacks represent the ‘other’ against which Whiteness is constructed, the backdoor to Whiteness is open to non-Blacks. Slipping through the opening is, then, a tactical matter for non-Blacks of conforming to White standards, of distancing themselves from Blackness, and of reproducing anti-Black ideas and sentiments.”

Warren and Twine, and others (Guinier and Torres 2002), claim that throughout the history of the United States, blacks have served a critical role in the construction and expansion of whiteness by serving as the definition of what white is not.

Moreover, scholars argue that whiteness is continuing to expand to incorporate new immigrant groups such as Asians and Latinos (Gallagher 2004; Gerstle 1999; Warren and Twine 1997). As evidence, Warren and Twine (1997) point to the observation made by many Americans that Asians and Latinos appear to “blend” more easily with whites compared to blacks. Furthermore, Gallagher (2004) argues that many whites view Asians and Latinos as more culturally similar to them than to blacks, and suggests that the United States is currently undergoing a process of “racial redistricting,” allowing Asians and Latinos (especially multiracial Asians and Latinos) to “glide easily” into the white category.

Given the rigidity of the boundary surrounding blacks, some social scientists argue that a black-nonblack divide is emerging, in which Asians and Latinos fall on the nonblack side of the divide. If this is the case, we would expect to find lower levels of multiracial reporting and identification among blacks compared to Asians and Latinos. We would also expect that their experiences with multiraciality will differ, with Asians and Latinos perceiving greater fluidity in their racial and ethnic options compared to blacks.

A Post-Racial America

Finally, other scholars such as David Hollinger (1995) propose the possibility that the color line may be fading altogether, and that the United States may be moving toward a cosmopolitan, post-ethnic, and post-racial era. In fact, some scholars argue that Barack Obama’s Presidential election and the widespread support that he has received from Americans of all backgrounds indicate that the United States may be moving beyond race. In fact, the day after the election, the New York Times headline read, “Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls,” highlighting the monumental significance of this event in the history of U. S. race relations (Nagourney 2008). And in a recent article in the Los Angeles Times, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom (2008) claim that the enormous appeal of Obama among black and white voters alike reveals that the country’s political climate has changed so dramatically that Americans may finally be able to lay down the burden of race.

In a post-ethnic and post-racial America, ethnic and racial affiliations would be porous and voluntary, and identities would be multiple and symbolic so that individuals could “affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to [the] extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them” (Hollinger 1995: 116). In this scenario, racial and ethnic identification would adopt a character similar to that of religious affiliation, in which individuals could not only choose their affiliation, but also exercise the “right to exit” from that group. In essence, critical to Hollinger’s vision of a post-ethnic and post-racial society is the element of choice in ethnic and racial identification.

Hollinger claims that multiracial Americans are performing a historic role at

the moment by helping to move the United States in this direction since they are able to freely choose “how tightly or loosely they wish to affiliate with one or more communities of descent” (Hollinger 1995: 165). In a similar vein, Herbert Gans (1999) views multiracial identification as a harbinger of progress because it reflects the diminishing significance of the current racial scheme. He further predicts that today’s racial categories may become increasingly less relevant in each generation until they fade altogether and become obsolete. With increasing interracial marriage and a growing multiracial population, the United States may indeed be moving in a post-racial direction in which race is declining in significance for all Americans. If this is the case, we would expect that racial and ethnic identities would be similarly voluntary, symbolic, and fluid for Americans of all racial backgrounds.

DATA AND METHODS

To adjudicate among these theoretical positions, I draw on analyses of 2000 U. S. Census data as well as in-depth interviews with 46 multiracial adults with Asian, Latino, or black ancestry. Before I continue, I should note one caveat about the data collection process regarding the in-depth interviews. The selection of the sample was complex because it is currently impossible to draw nationally representative random samples of multiracial adults because no national (or even local) lists of such individuals exist. While previous qualitative studies have often recruited respondents from multiracial organizations or by placing advertisements in newspapers, newsletters, or magazines geared to this population, I purposely decided not to recruit respondents using this method since most individuals who belong to such organizations join them because of their strong awareness of and identification with their multiracial backgrounds.

Instead, I recruited respondents through ethnic markets, ethnic restaurants, and ethnic salons in the southern and northern California areas. I contacted the owners of these establishments, and they referred us to some of their regular customers who had mentioned that they had parents of different cultural, racial, or ethnic backgrounds. Then I snowball sampled from there, and recruited additional respondents. The benefit of drawing the initial population from these businesses rather than from multiracial organizations is that while the respondents may acknowledge their mixed ancestries, they may not necessarily identify multiracially. Hence, I was able to identify a sample of “potential multiracials” with less bias toward those who clearly identify multiracially.

Furthermore, because I conducted the interviews in California, the Latino multiracials in the sample are of Mexican origin since most Latino immigrants in California arrive from Mexico. This is germane because the history of racial mixing in Mexico involves mostly Indians, Spaniards, and whites with the racial continuum ranging from white to Indian, resulting in a mestizo racial identity. However, Latino multiracials of different national origins may have different

experiences with multiracial identification, especially if the racial mixing includes African ancestry in their countries of origin. Hence, it is important to note that some of the findings about Latino multiracials may not be generalizable to all Latino multiracials. Table 1 lists the respondents by the racial categories of identification.

Table 1. Respondents by Race in the Interview Sample

Multiracial Individuals	Total
Asian/ White	16
Latino/ White	8
Black/ White	9
Black/ Asian	5
Black/ Latino	2
Asian/ Latino	6
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	46

I chose to interview respondents in California because California leads the country with the highest number of multiracial individuals. This is not surprising given that California legalized interracial marriage in 1948—nearly twenty years before the 1967 ruling *Loving v. Virginia* in which the U. S. Supreme Court overturned the country’s final anti-miscegenation laws. As a result, not only does California have a larger interracially married population than other states in the country, but also a larger multiracial population. In California, 1.6 million people identified multiracially, accounting for 4.7% of its population, or 1 in every 21 Californians. Among Californians under the age of 18, the ratio rises to 1 in 14. To help put this ratio into perspective, the number of multiracial births already exceeds the number of black and Asian births in the state of California (Tafoya et al. 2005). Therefore, by interviewing respondents in California, we get a preview of where the color line is changing most rapidly in the United States.

RESULTS

A Portrait of America’s Multiracial Population

For the first time in U. S. history, the 2000 Census allowed Americans to mark “one or more” races to indicate their racial identification. This was a landmark change in the way the census measures race not only because it acknowledged the reality of interracial unions and racial mixing, but also because it reflected the view that race was no longer constructed as an absolutely bounded, exclusivist set of categories. This is a momentous shift considering that the United States had historically been hostile to racial mixture as evidenced by the legal invocation of the “one-drop” rule of hypodescent in which any American

with a small fraction of black blood was identified as black (Davis 1991; Hollinger 2003; Nobles 2000; Williams 2006).

In 2000, about 6.8 million Americans, or 2.4% of the population, identified themselves or members of their households as multiracial. Although this may not appear very large, demographers estimate that the multiracial population could soar to 21% by the year 2050, and to 33% by 2100 (Smith and Edmonston 1997; Lee and Edmonston 2005). A key sign of the growth in this population is its youthfulness; among Americans who identified multiracially, 42% were under the age of 18, compared to 25% of other Americans.

However, rates of multiracial identification vary widely across racial groups. As Table 2 indicates, 12% of Asians and 16% of “Other” Americans (i. e., Latinos) identified multiracially, yet only 4% of the black population did so. I use “Other” as a proxy for Latinos because in both the 1990 and 2000 Censuses, 97% of those who marked “Other” as their race were Latinos.

Table 2. Multiracial Identification by Census Racial Categories

	Racial Identification ¹ (millions)	Multiracial Identification ² (millions)	Percent Multiracial
White	216.5	5.1	2.3
Black	36.2	1.5	4.2
Asian	11.7	1.4	12.4
Other	18.4	3.0	16.4
American Indian and Alaska Native	3.9	1.4	36.4
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0.7	0.3	44.8

Source: U. S. Census 2000

What is particularly noteworthy is that the rate of multiracial reporting is much lower for blacks than for Asians and Latinos, even after controlling for differences in age, education, nativity, gender, and region of the United States. In large part, the low rate of multiracial reporting among blacks reflects the historical and continued significance of the once *de jure* and now *de facto* “one-drop rule of hypodescent” that labeled all Americans with any trace of black ancestry as black. The one-drop rule was first implemented during the era of slavery so that children born to white male slave owners and black female slaves would be legally identified as black, and as a result, have no rights to property and other wealth holdings of their white fathers. When the United States abolished slavery, southern states such as Tennessee and Louisiana formally legalized the rule of hypodescent in 1910, with other states soon following suit. By 1925, nearly every state in the country had institutionalized the practice into law. By adopting the one-drop rule of hypodescent, the United States refused to

acknowledge the mixed racial backgrounds of black-white Americans by formally assigning them a black racial identity. It was not until Loving v. Virginia in 1967 when the U. S. Supreme Court overturned the final ban on interracial marriage that the one-drop rule also lost its legal legitimacy.

While the one-drop rule is no longer legally enforced, its legacy remains intact and its influence, widely felt in American society. It explains, for example, why the U. S. Census estimates that over 75% of black Americans are ancestrally multiracial, yet only 4% choose to identify as such. It also explains why Tiger Woods—whose mother is Thai and whose father is African American—is hailed as the first African American golf superstar, rather than the first Asian American golf superstar. It also explains why Barack Obama strongly identifies as black and has never considered identifying as white, even though his mother is white. While the one-drop rule may no longer be legally imposed on black Americans, it has been so ingrained into the history of race relations that both black and white Americans alike continue to cling to its legacy and practice.

Moreover, when we examine patterns of multiracial reporting among couples with children under the age of 18, we find that 40% of children living with couples of different races are identified multiracially. For instance, 49% of black-white couples, 52% of Asian-white couples, and 25% of Latino-white couples identified their children multiracially. However, when these couples choose a single race to identify their children, most black-white couples choose black, yet most Asian-white and Latino-white couples choose white rather than Asian or Latino (Tafuya et al. 2005). Hence, not only are Asians and Latinos more likely to report a multiracial identification than blacks, but Asian-white and Latino-white multiracial children are more likely to be identified as white rather than as Asian or Latino, whereas black-white multiracial children are more likely to be identified as black rather than white. Based on the multiracial identification patterns that emerge from the U. S. Census, Asians and Latinos follow one model and blacks follow another.

To uncover the processes behind some of the patterns from the census, I turn to the data from the in-depth interviews of the multiracial adults. Two main research questions guided the analyses that follow. First, do all multiracial Americans feel free to choose among various racial and multiracial options? Second, what meaning does multiraciality hold for these respondents? In other words, is multiracial identification simply a response to a census questionnaire, or is it instrumental and consequential in the everyday lives of multiracial Americans?

Outsiders' Ascription and the Inclusivity/Exclusivity of Racial Categorization

The first notable difference is that multiracial Asians and Latinos have much more flexibility in their choice of racial and ethnic identities compared to multiracial blacks, in large part, because of the sheer force of outsiders' ascription, which constrains the racial options of multiracial blacks. Sociologists

have noted that racial and ethnic identity formation is a dialectical process—one that involves both internal and external opinions and processes. In essence, what matters is not only how an individual chooses to identify himself or herself, but also how others choose to identify the individual. External opinions, therefore, can powerfully influence and constrain an individual's identity options (Nagel 1994). This is certainly the case for black immigrants as Philip Kasinitz (1992) and Mary Waters (1999) have shown in their work. Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean who come to the United States soon realize that the power of race—and blackness in particular—often overrides differences in nativity, ethnicity, class, and skin tone.

Outsiders' ascription similarly constrains the identity options for multiracial blacks, and hence, multiracial blacks are less likely to identify multiracially because others immediately identify and treat them as black. For example, when we asked a 33 year-old woman born to a white mother and black father why she chose to identify as black on the census form, she explained,

“I feel if somebody is going to look at me they're not going to think I'm white so I put black. I don't think I'd identify as white very often, but I guess if it's very specific then I'm going to indicate that I'm both black and white. I mean, I know that I'm mixed, but if it were to come up, and it were to be a choice, one or the other, I would say I'm black.”

Other black multiracials echoed similar sentiments. So powerful is the force of outsiders' ascription that a black-white multiracial man we interviewed chooses to identify his sons, who he conceived with a white woman, as black rather than as multiracial or white. When we asked why he identifies them as black, he explains, “I would say that they're half and half on the purest level, but still, for some reason, I just look at them as black.” Here, he notes that not only does he identify as black, but he also identifies his children as black, even though he could claim a multiracial identification for himself and his children.

By comparison, multiracial Asians and Latinos feel that they have much more leeway to choose among different racial options, including multiracial and white identities. Some choose to identify as half-Asian or half-Latino or as white, and just as importantly, their multiracial and white identities are readily accepted by others. Moreover, unlike black-white multiracials, Latino-white and Asian-white multiracials are often identified as white by others, which in turn, affects the way they identify themselves. For instance, many of the multiracial Latino-whites feel that they look white without a hint of Latino ethnicity. Their perception that they look white is reinforced by others who are shocked to learn they have a Latino parent, as a 23 year-old Mexican-white multiracial woman explains,

“I feel like I'm white with a hint of Mexican. That's not usually what I identify with, and that's not how people identify me either. I feel mostly Caucasian, but I do have a Mexican background and family and heritage, but I identify with being white more just because that's the way I look. I mean, people are always surprised to find

that my Mom is Mexican. They say, ‘Oh my God, I never would have known. You look like a total white girl.’”

This type of response was typical of many of the Latino-white multiracials who we interviewed. The surprised reaction that they receive stems, in part, from the fact that many non-Latinos have a very narrow and specific vision of what a Latino should look like (Jiménez 2004; Rodríguez and Cordero-Guzman 1992). For instance, when we asked a Mexican-white couple what they thought the stereotypical image of a Mexican is, the wife, who is white, elaborated,

“I know for a fact when I tell people that my husband is Mexican, I know in their mind that they have an image of dark skin, sombrero, the totally classic, what’s his name, the coffee guy? Juan Valdez.” Her Mexican husband interjected and corrected her, “He’s Colombian.” She then continued, “Well, whatever, but that’s the stereotype.”

While Latinos recognize that as a group, they span the color and feature spectrum—with many having fair skin, blond hair, and light eyes—non-Latinos often have a very specific vision of what a Latino should look like. Non-Latinos are often surprised to meet Latinos and Latino multiracials who do not have dark skin or dark features, and similarly, non-Asians are surprised to meet multiracial Asians who do not have black hair and brown eyes. What is especially notable here is that while we have a very narrow and specific vision of what Latinos and Asians should look like, we have a much broader vision of what blacks look like. There is no stereotypical black look. We recognize blackness on sight, and have come to accept that blackness spans the color and feature spectrum.

The differences in racial identification and ascription point to what I refer to as “the inclusivity and exclusivity of racial and ethnic categorization.” While outsiders’ ascription of black identity is very inclusive, outsiders’ ascription of Latino and Asian identity is much more exclusive (Lee and Bean 2007). Given the unique history of blacks in the United States—including slavery and Jim Crow segregation—Americans have become acutely aware of identifying black ancestry in a way that Americans are not similarly attuned to identifying Asian or Latino ancestry. Hence, it is not simply that Asian and Latino multiracials look more white, as some may believe, but rather, that Americans are not as attuned to identifying and committed to constraining Asian and Latino ancestries in the same manner that Americans identify and constrain black ancestries.

In part, this stems from the relative newness of the Asian and Latino multiracial populations, combined with the lack of historical rules that govern their choice of identities. But the difference also stems from the invidiousness of the “one-drop” rule, which has historically treated blackness as an all-encompassing, monolithic category. The combination of these factors provides multiracial Asians and Latinos more freedom to choose among various racial and ethnic options, including multiracial and white identities.

Symbolic and Situational Identities

The second research question that I aim to answer in the paper is what meaning does multiracial identification have for multiracial Americans? In other words, is marking more than one race on the census form simply a response to a census questionnaire and therefore symbolic (Gans 1979; Waters 1990), or is it a meaningful and instrumental part of the lives of the multiracial respondents? The data show that multiracial identification is largely symbolic and situational for Asian-white and Latino-white multiracials, but not for multiracial Americans with black ancestry. While the former do not deny the racial and ethnic mixture of their backgrounds, most feel that race and ethnicity hold little consequence in their daily lives. For instance, when we interviewed a Japanese-white multiracial man, he expressed the view that he does not believe that race will affect his life chances, nor does he believe that race matters much for anyone who is “really good” at what they do, as he explains,

“I don’t think your race matters that much if you’re really good at what you do. Well, at least in the U. S. you can be very successful, so I don’t think how I look on the outside affects it. It should depend more on the things that I’m able to do. I don’t really feel it’s going to affect me. I don’t see limits.”

Interestingly, when we spoke to a Vietnamese-white woman, she admitted that she often forgets about her Asian ethnic background entirely, as she relays,

“Say we’re in a room full of all white people and I’m like the only Asian, I almost always forget that I’m Asian, or half Asian. Almost always. I consider myself white. I act very white as far as I’m concerned because that’s all I know. So I don’t have very much Vietnamese culture in me.”

“I don’t like Asian food, I have no Asian culture, I have no Asian traditions, and I know absolutely no Vietnamese. The only thing Asian about me is the fact that my mother is Vietnamese. I do everything white. I have all white traditions. I speak English. Everything about me is white, except for my car; it’s a Honda!” [she laughs]

For this woman, her Vietnamese ethnicity is so non-constraining that she forgets about it altogether, indicating the optional nature of her ethnicity. However, when asked how she identifies on forms, she indicates that she always marks both white and Vietnamese or Asian.

Moreover, when we spoke to a man born to a white mother and Asian Indian father, he explained that while he identifies as white in his everyday life, he always marks both “Asian Indian” and “white” on the census and other official forms,

“I always felt like a regular kid, other than just being tanner than other people. But other than that, I identified with being 100 percent white. I don’t identify that strongly with being Indian, but every time I put anything down on the census or anything, I’m Indian and white.”

Most noteworthy about his response is that while he admits to having always identified as “100 percent white,” he chooses to mark his Indian ethnicity on official documents, indicating that marking himself as Indian is an option that he consciously chooses, even though he may not identify as such in his everyday life. During the interview, we also asked how he plans to identify his unborn son. His wife (who is white and was eight months pregnant at the time) responded,

“Personally I would still consider our child Indian, even though the Indian side is watered down considerably. I don’t want to ignore that. I think it’s still important.” The husband then added, “I mean I wish I had a stronger identification with being Indian. I really like learning about it, and I wish I knew more. For me, it’s important, and I really need to know about it, so I think it’s important for our child to have that same thing.”

While neither he nor his wife have a sense of what it means to “be Indian,” both feel that it is important to learn more about being Indian, especially because they are about to have a child. In essence, this couple treats Asian Indian ethnicity as a foreign and exotic culture that can be learned and acquired rather than something that is lived and experienced in everyday life.

What is critical to underscore here is that for the Asian-white and Latino-white multiracial respondents, claiming a white racial identity does not preclude them from also claiming an Asian or Latino ethnicity. They can be white, yet also be Asian Indian, Japanese, or Mexican, just as one can be Italian, Irish, or German and also be white, signaling that Asian and Latino ethnicities for multiracial Asians and Latinos are adopting the symbolic character of European ethnicity for white Americans. By contrast, none of the black multiracial respondents identified as white or nonblack, and none felt that their black ethnic identities were similarly optional or voluntary.

What also became evident during the interviews was the situational nature of Asian and Latino multiracial identities. For instance, when a Mexican male and his white wife were discussing how they should identify their daughter, Ana (who was one year-old at the time), on the 2000 census form, they debated the question of whether they should identify her as “Hispanic.” Their exchange was caught on tape, as the wife begins,

Wife: I don’t know for Ana. Would you say that Ana is Hispanic? I would say no, not Spanish.

Husband: I would say no, she’s not Spanish, but it depends. If this was a college—

Wife: I would say she has a Spanish, Hispanic parent, but I don’t think she is.

Husband: But would that make her Hispanic or not?

Wife: No.

Husband: But how are you defining Hispanic? Based on birth, yeah, because that's how I'm defining it. But if this was a college application we'd say yeah.

Wife: Oh yeah, we'd say yeah.

Interviewer: Why would you say yes if it was a college application?

Husband: Because she'd get into a better school because of it.

Interviewer: Why?

Husband: Because she's a minority. It would do more for her getting into a better college. I mean, opportunities.

While both the husband and wife agree that their daughter is not Hispanic and choose not to mark her as Hispanic on the census form, they quickly note that they would identify her as such for a college application. They firmly believe that Ana would benefit from her minority status because she would become eligible for affirmative action programs designed to assist disadvantaged, racialized minorities. As they justify, by identifying their daughter as Hispanic, they are maximizing the opportunities that are available to her, even if they do not identify her as Hispanic on other documents or in everyday life. They recognize and take full advantage of their daughter's multiracial background, which provides the option to privilege one identity over another, depending on the context and the benefits associated with that choice.

In sum, the experiences of Asian and Latino multiracials differ remarkably from those of black multiracials. Not only are Latinos and Asians more likely to report a multiracial identification, but the multiracials are more likely to describe their Asian and Latino identities as voluntary, optional, and situational rather than ascribed, instrumental, and consequential, suggesting that the Asian and Latino identities are adopting the symbolic character of white ethnicity. By contrast, none of the black multiracials equated their black or African American identity as a racial or ethnic option. Moreover, none identified as white or nonblack, signaling that black remains a relatively fixed racialized category.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

What do the patterns of multiracial identification suggest about race and the color line in America? The findings indicate that race continues to remain significant in the lives of Americans, especially for black Americans, revealing that the United States has not evolved into a post-racial society. However, the racial group boundaries are fading more rapidly for Latinos and Asians than for blacks, signaling that today's new nonwhite immigrants are not incorporating as racialized minorities whose experiences with race are akin to those of blacks, as would be predicted by the white-nonwhite divide. That racial and ethnic identities are much less matters of choice for multiracial blacks indicates that black remains a significant racial category, providing support for the black exceptionalism thesis.

The findings strongly suggest that a black-nonblack divide is emerging, in which Asians and Latinos are closer to whites than to blacks at this point in time. Along with patterns of multiracial identification, trends in interracial marriage indicate that this is the case. About 30% of Asian and Latino marriages are interracial, meaning that about one-third of married Asians and Latinos has a spouse of a different racial background. For American-born Asians and Latinos, the figures are even higher, at 56% and 42%, respectively, meaning that over half of American-born married Asians and more than two-fifths of American-born married Latinos has a spouse of a different racial background, typically whites (Lee and Bean 2004). Based on the trends in intermarriage, the multiracial population will continue to grow, and by the year 2050, demographers estimate that about 35% of Asians and 45% of Hispanics will be multiracial. The trends in interracial marriage and multiracial identification strongly suggest that in the 21st century, we may simply be redrawing the color line from black-white to black-nonblack, rather than eradicating it altogether.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminar (NASSS) at Nanzan University in July 2008. I wish to thank Professors Masaki Kawashima, Tadashi Nagasawa, Yasuko Takezawa, Michael Mastanduno, and Rey Chow, as well as the other NASSS participants for their insightful comments and suggestions. The research for this paper emerges from a project with Frank D. Bean. For invaluable research assistance, I thank Jody Agius Vallejo and Sabeen Sandhu. I also wish to acknowledge the Russell Sage Foundation for generously supporting the research on which this paper is based (Grant #88-01-11) and a Fulbright Grant for making my travel to Japan possible. Please direct all correspondence to Jennifer Lee, Department of Sociology, University of California-Irvine, Irvine, CA 92697-5100 (jenlee@uci.edu).

REFERENCES

- Alba Richard. 1990. *Ethnic Identity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Alba Richard. 1985. *Italian Americans*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Alba Richard and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bean Frank D. and Gillian Stevens. 2003. *America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Borjas George J. 1999. *Heaven's Door*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brodkin Karen. 1998. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Davis F. James. 1991. *Who is Black?* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Farley Reynolds. 2002. "Racial Identities in 2000." pp. 33-61 in *The New Race Question*, edited by Joel Perlmann and Mary C. Waters. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gallagher Charles A. 2004. "Racial Redistricting: Expanding the Boundaries of Whiteness." pp. 59-76 in *The Politics of Multiracialism*, edited by Heather M. Dalmage. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gans Herbert J. 2005. "Race as Class." *Contexts* 4: 17-21.
- Gans Herbert J. 1979. "Symbolic Ethnicity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2: 1-20.
- Gerstle Gary. 1999. "Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans." pp. 275-93 in *The Handbook of International Migration*, edited by Charles Hirschman, Philip Kasinitz, Josh DeWind. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gitlin Todd. 1995. *The Twilight of Common Dreams*. New York: Metropolitan.
- Guinier Lani and Gerald Torres. 2002. *The Miner's Canary*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Haney-López Ian F. 1996. *White by Law*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hollinger David A. 2003. "Amalgamation and Hypodescent." *American Historical Review* 108: 1363-90.
- Hollinger David A. 1995. *Postethnic America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Huntington Samuel P. 2004. *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ignatiev Noel. 1995. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge.
- Jacobson Matthew Frye. 1998. *Whiteness of a Different Color*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jacoby Tamar. 2001. "An End to Counting Race?" *Commentary* 111, 6 (June): 37-40.
- Jiménez Tomás R. 2004. "Negotiating Ethnic Boundaries." *Ethnicities* 4: 75-97.
- Kasinitz Philip. 1992. *Caribbean New York*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lee Jennifer and Frank D. Bean. 2007. "Reinventing the Color Line." *Social Forces* 86 (2): 561-586.
- Lee Jennifer and Frank D. Bean. 2004. "America's Changing Color Lines." *Annual Review of Sociology* 30: 221-42.
- Lee Jennifer and Min Zhou. 2004. *Asian American Youth*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee Sharon M. and Barry Edmonston. 2005. "New Marriages, New Families: U. S. Racial and Hispanic Inter-marriage." *Population Bulletin* 60 (2): 1-36.

- Loewen James. 1971. *The Mississippi Chinese*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nagel Joane. 1994. "Constructing Ethnicity." *Social Problems* 41: 152-76.
- Nagourney, Adam. 2008. "Obama Elected President as Racial Barrier Falls." *New York Times*, November 5, 2008.
- Ngai Mae. 2004. *Impossible Subjects*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nobles Melissa. 2000. *Shades of Citizenship*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Perlmann Joel and Roger Waldinger. 1997. "Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present—A Reconsideration." *International Migration Review* 31 (4): 893-922.
- Portes Alejandro, Patricia Fernández-Kelly, and William Haller. 2005. "Segmented Assimilation on the Ground: The New Second Generation in Early Adulthood." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28: 1000-40.
- Rodríguez Clara E. and Hector Cordero-Guzman. 1992. "Placing Race in Context." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15: 523-42.
- Roediger David R. 1991. *The Wages of Whiteness*. New York: Verso.
- Sanjek Roger. 1994. "Intermarriage and the Future of the Races." In *Race*, edited by S. Gregory and R. Sanjek. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Smith James P. and Barry Edmonston. 1997. *The New Americans*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Tafoya Sonya M., Hans Johnson, and Laura E. Hill. 2005. "Who Chooses to Choose Two?" pp. 332-351 in *The American People: Census 2000*, edited by Reynolds Farley and John Haaga. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Thernstrom Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom. 2008. "Is Race Out of the Race?" *Los Angeles Times*, Op-Ed, March 2, 2008.
- U. S. Bureau of the Census, Population Division. 2002. "Foreign-Born Population of the United States. Current Population Survey-March 2000. Detailed Tables." vol. 2/2002: U. S. Census Bureau, Population Division, Ethnic and Hispanic Statistics Branch.
- U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. 2003. *Statistical Yearbook of the U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002*. Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- U. S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. 2002. *2000 INS Statistical Yearbook*. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office.
- Waldinger Roger and Jennifer Lee. 2001. "New Immigrants in Urban America." pp. 30-79 in *Strangers at the Gates*, edited by Roger Waldinger. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Warren Jonathan W. and France Winddance Twine. 1997. "White Americans, the New Minority?" *Journal of Black Studies* 28: 200-218.
- Waters Mary C. 1999. *Black Identities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Waters Mary C. 1990. *Ethnic Options*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Williams Kim. 2006. *Mark One or More*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Notes

- 1 Racial/Ethnic group totals do not sum to the total U. S. population because multiracial persons are counted here in more than one group.
- 2 Multiracial persons are counted for each race category mentioned.