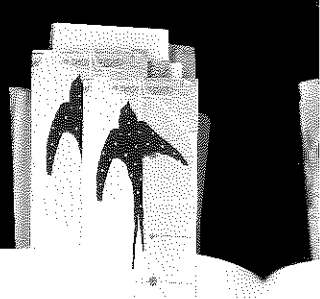

CHAPTER 32

Struggling for Identity

Multiethnic and Biracial Individuals in America

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While teaching a sophomore level interpersonal communication course, in the midst of class discussion, one of my students interrupted me in midsentence and called out, "What are you?!" As if to respond to my quizzical facial expression, she immediately retorted, "You know what I mean, WHAT ARE YOU?!" I replied without fanfare, "My family looks like a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly, with every ethnicity represented." She remained after class asking for further explanation of what I meant. As a multiracial person,[1] my unfamiliar variances in physical features defy immediate ethnic categorization in a nation that is obsessed with this practice.

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

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

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

Narrative and Historical Perspective

Uncovering my ethnic background has been complex. My father was the son of an Anglo American male and a woman of African American and Native American descent. He had olive skin and in the international milieu that is Washington, DC, where we lived, he was often mistaken for being of Mediterranean descent. My mother is also multiethnic. Her father, a Southern Baptist minister was, according to family history, the grandson of an Anglo American general in the Confederate Army from North Carolina and a biracial female who worked in his house. From all accounts the general assumed some

responsibility for this son, my great-grandfather, by educating him. My grandfather's father was perceived as white because of his phenotype and because the African Americans in the community called him "white man," although they knew he was partially black. My grandfather himself looked Anglo as well. He had fair skin, an aquiline nose, thin lips, and straight hair. My grandfather's wife, my maternal grandmother, was of Native American, African American, and Anglo American descent. She had high cheekbones, blue eyes, and skin coloring like a Native American. Their daughter, my mother, is a fair-skinned brunette with hazel eyes.

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

At that time "one drop rules," or *code noir* (black code), still existed. Code noir was the rule of hypodescent, which held that if you had any known African American ancestry at all, you were considered to be black regardless of your skin color or other features. As a result, my parents categorized themselves as African Americans. Throughout the history of the United States, race has been a defining factor in society. The most important thing about the stratification of races in the United States was the boundaries between them. If the races were pure and one were a member of the race on the top, then it was essential to maintain the boundaries that defined one's superiority, to keep people in lower categories from moving upward. Thus U.S. law defined just who was in which racial category. Most of the boundary drawing came on the border between white and black. The boundaries were drawn not on the basis of biology—genotype and phenotype—but on the basis of descent. For the purposes of the laws of nine southern and border states in the early 1900s, a "Negro" was defined as someone with a single Negro great-grandparent; in three other southern states, a Negro great-great-grandparent would suffice. That is, a person with 15 White ancestors four generations back and a single Negro ancestor at the same remove was considered a Negro by U.S. law. In practice—both legal and customary—anyone with any known African ancestry was deemed an African American, and those without any trace of known African ancestry were called whites. One drop laws existed in an attempt to keep the white race pure (Spickard, 1992).

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

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

I attribute the loss of my Native American cultural roots to this phenomenon.

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

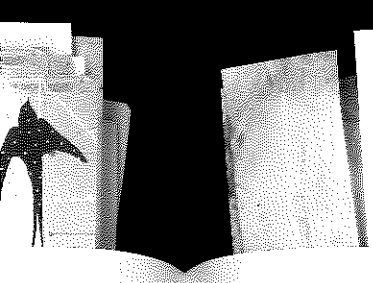
Racism appears not to have been a factor in the English bias against intermarriage with Indians. Perceived as darker than Europeans, Indians were considered essentially White people whose exposure to the sun and custom of painting the body with natural dyes explained their various hues. Indians were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

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

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

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

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



me in these two events, and I learned that the pervasive racism that existed on both sides of the color line would ensure that my life on the color line would not be easy.

I had attended a predominantly white middle school and high school in Washington, DC, but I chose to attend Howard University, America's premier black university. In high school I had been criticized by some blacks for "talking and acting white" and without question I certainly looked more white than black. My decision then to attend Howard owed in part to thinking that my being at the most prestigious African American university would help forge within me a strong cultural identity of "Afrocentricity," the term currently used by academics to explain the intellectual framework for African American identity (Asante, 1987). Poet Sterling Brown, a 1926 Harvard graduate and 40-year veteran of the Howard English faculty, helped me better understand that people of African descent share a common experience and struggle. I would go to the Florida Avenue Grill with Brown, who was then in his 70s and no longer teaching full time, and listen to him recount his days with Duke Ellington, with whom he had a close association. He would read letters that they had written each other and explain the evolution of Ellington's music. He spoke in vivid detail and great candor of the struggle of talented African Americans in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (then called Negroes) to receive the recognition that they richly deserved. Sterling and his wife Daisy lived not too far from my parents' home, and sometimes I would visit them there. My experience at Howard helped me both academically and socially to understand the notion of Afrocentricity in terms of my own life.

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

My matriculation resulted in two Howard University degrees and a healthy appreciation for black culture. I learned black linguistic speech, how to cook soul food, corn row, enjoy Marvin Gaye concerts, and relate to humor from comedian Sinbad. My experience was consistent with the findings of researchers who have argued that acceptance of the biracial or multiethnic individual by the Black community is predicated on the biracial and multiethnic individual's adoption of the mores of that community and the exhibition of specific culturally related behaviors (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Sebring, 1985). Further, some individuals will choose to identify almost exclusively with the part of themselves that society devalues most before ultimately feeling comfortable with all aspects of self (Nash, 1992). There were a few times my African American girlfriends were criticized for always "hanging out with a white girl." One time in particular, a Dorothy Dandridge–looking girl friend defended my being black to a group of young black women by proclaiming, "Mona has always been black," by which she meant that I had never tried to pass as white. "She goes to Howard." The women retorted, "I don't care if she goes to Howard or not. You're not black until someone treats you like you're black. When I go to Neiman Marcus to shop, I can't even get one of those white sales ladies to wait on me. I bet that doesn't happen to you. Does it?" When I honestly replied, "No, that hasn't happened to me," there was no more to be said. I again felt the sting of rejection. However for the most part, my education at Howard University fulfilled a sense of belonging that I needed, and I succeeded in developing a cultural identity.

While pursuing my master's in human communication studies at Howard, I met my husband-to-be, who was an anomaly as a white disc jockey on the

NBC-owned urban formatted radio station. My husband was well exposed to African American culture in Washington, DC, sometimes called Chocolate City because of its predominantly black population. Many of his friends and nearly all of his coworkers were black. However, even with all of his exposure to blacks of various hues he did not initially recognize me as African American. When we first met, he thought that my name was Friedman and that I was Jewish. I corrected him and explained that my name was Freeman not Friedman. Later in that conversation, I disclosed that I was black. Although I realized that I was multiethnic, I identified myself as black to eliminate any possible perception that I was attempting to pass.

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

My husband is Anglo and Portuguese and, although he has always considered himself to be white, he is of mixed ethnicity, and some would argue that he is a product of an interethnic marriage, if not interracial. As F. James Davis (1991), a sociologist, observed "other racial minorities . . . can be absorbed if they become one-fourth or less of that ancestry" (p. 12). Therefore, although my husband is Anglo and Portuguese he is considered white, as is our friend who is Anglo and Native American. But because Americans are accustomed to classifying anyone with any African heritage as black, biracial or multiracial people have not been viewed the same way as other mixed ethnic or race individuals.

When my husband and I decided that we would marry, I mentioned to a family friend, William Fitzgerald, Sr., an African American who in 1988 was the founder and president of the second-largest African American bank in the United States, that I was engaged, he immediately asked, "Is he black or white?" I replied, "He is white, actually he is Anglo and Portuguese." I wondered if I would be alienated by the black community, so I asked, "Is this going to be a problem?" Fitzgerald replied, "Portuguese is not far from black." And thus gave his approval. This is an example of how race has always been significant in the way Americans perceive others.

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

"Well, I'm very interested in hearing about this topic. Please go on," I said.

"My topic is about mixed-race marriages and people. I don't believe in it. I think that the races should be separate and not comingle especially not reproduce. It's nothing worse than mixed-race people, it's an abomination," he pronounced confidently, leaning back in his chair.

"Hmmm, I see. Well, I've always taken the position of never dictating to students what their topics should be, so please don't feel as if you can't speak on this topic because you think you would be personally offending me as a mixed-race person myself. I believe that I can maintain my objectivity and professionalism," I explained very calmly looking him in the eye. I saw his jaw drop and what appeared to be a shocked look that replaced the previous smug one. He immediately began gathering his papers to leave my office. He seemed unsettled when he said, "Thanks for your time, Professor Leonard. I need to give my topic some more thought."

By the next class period he announced very casually that he had changed his topic and slipped me a piece of paper with a new topic. I considered that he might withdraw from my class, but he did not. I had thought that, in his perspective, I would have lost all credibility. Instead he never missed class, watched me intently, and appeared to listen

attentively to every word I said. We never spoke about those issues again, and he treated me very deferentially. I treated him with the same professional courtesy that I extended to my other students. In the end, he successfully completed the course.

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

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

Asserting an Identity for Multiethnic and Biracial Individuals

In my interviews I have discovered that other multiethnic and biracial individuals have sought different ways to develop their racial identities. A female friend, who is also multiethnic and looks even more "white" than I do, with bone-straight hair and pencil-thin lips, chose another approach to forging her black identity. Having absolutely no African phenotype, there would be no discernible way anyone could identify her as African American by her appearance. At least for me, my hair would curl some and my skin is somewhat olive, so many would say that I looked Italian. However, my friend looks like a WASP. She, too, attended primarily white middle and high schools. Ultimately, she chose to attend and graduated from Emerson College in Boston. She strongly yearned to be identified as black and the only way that she could was to speak in black vernacular. Her mother, a teacher, did not speak this way, but my friend went about learning black linguistic speech with the same kind of intensity that she applied to her academics. She spoke with disdain of members of her family who severed ties to pass as white. There were members of her family like her who identified themselves as African Americans (although they had no discernible African features) and other family members who were passing.

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

Courtney (1995), who is biracial, echoed the same sentiment in his *Newsweek* article in which he stated, "My white friends want me to act one way—white. My African-American friends want me to act another—black. Pleasing them both is nearly impossible and leaves little room to be just me" (p. 16).

Friends of my husband and myself, a couple where the husband is American-born Chinese and the wife is white, have a daughter who is then biracial, Asian and Anglo. The father is an orthopedic surgeon, and the mother is in law school. They live in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. They are fortunate in that they have been able to afford to send their daughter to a private school whose

administrators and student body embrace cultural diversity. Therefore their 13-year-old daughter has not been confronted with the issues that Courtney has faced. This could be partly attributable to their daughter being Asian and white rather than black and white, and because she is only 13 years old and Courtney is in his 20s. The mother explained that when faced with government forms that categorize American citizens into six groups—white, black, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, American Indian, and other—she chooses "other" for her daughter. She views her daughter as biracial, and she has reared her daughter with knowledge about both cultures. However, the mother stated that she would check the boxes for both white and Asian on forms and applications to describe her daughter as the 2000 U.S. Census allowed. In 2009, their daughter, then 21, made a concerted effort to learn more about her Chinese heritage. She chose to take Chinese as her foreign language, in high school and in college. Recently, she and her father traveled to Beijing to experience more of the Chinese culture.

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

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

Malcolm Gladwell, author of five books, many of which reached on the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, although mostly white, is multiracial. Gladwell's mother was Jamaican, Scottish, and Jewish. To many, he looks white. However, now that he has grown a loose, large Afro, he appears in some photographs to look marginally black. When I saw the photograph of him wearing an afro, I recalled the time that I worked hard to create an afro in anticipation of meeting Muhammad Ali.

Gladwell wrote of his multiethnicity, "I am an outsider many times over, an English person who grew up in Canada, neither white nor black—a multiple outsider." He addresses his ethnic makeup in his book *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008). In 1996 he wrote on growing up biracial:

> I am not like my parents. I do not have my father's gift for overcoming social barriers, nor my mother's gift for appreciating when differences are not relevant. I go back and forth between my two sides. I never feel my whiteness more than when I am around West Indians and never feel my West Indianness more than when I am with whites. If you mix black and white you don't obliterate those categories; you create a third category, a category that demands for its very existence an even greater commitment to nuances of racial taxonomy. By virtue of my upbringing, I can safely say I am free of racial discrimination. I cannot—without committing an extraordinary act of self-hatred—ever believe that blacks are inferior in any way. But, I am also, perhaps permanently hostage to the questions of racial difference. (Wolf, 2009)

President Barack Obama's mixed-race heritage has further ignited debates about U.S. racial taxonomies. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama spoke of growing up multiracial in an Anglo American family, "Away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant (p. 76). Obama is seen by most of the U.S. electorate as an African American or black American. His matching self-identification reflects the shared experience of having to deal with racial oppression. In other words, although a person might not speak Black English or like rap music, he may have a bond with other African Americans because of their shared struggle with racism. He is also not the descendant of slaves forcibly taken, sold, and

shipped to America. This historical traumatizing era of slavery has significantly impacted African American culture and U.S. race relations (Lee, 2008). Because Obama's ancestors were not slaves (his father was a black Kenyan and his mother was an Anglo American from Kansas) and he was not a political activist during the civil rights era, this might have contributed to some prominent African American leaders criticizing him for not being "black enough." Appearing on *60 Minutes* in 2007, Obama defended his blackness when he cited, as an example of his racial authenticity, his inability to get a cab in New York (Serwer, 2008).

Although Obama is a multiracial man, to define yourself as biracial if you happen to be a half-black and half-white politician means risking alienation from black voters, who will presume that you are trying to distance yourself from blackness simply by acknowledging your Anglo genes (Lee, 2008; Serwer, 2008). He has African physical characteristics, looks like what most Americans think of as black man, and would presumably be treated like a black man on an average city street. He could not conceivably claim to be an Anglo American. This is another example of how phenotype determines how society perceives and categorizes the individual and has thus influenced how a biracial individual categorizes himself.

Tiger Woods, the golfer, brought the issue of multiethnicity to the forefront when he won the Masters golf tournament and the media described him as African American. His mother is of Thai descent and his father is African American. Woods insisted that he is not just African American. The then 21-year-old golf prodigy said he could never settle on one race category that best described his ethnicity, so he always checked off two boxes. Because Woods described himself as multiethnic, the age-old debate over racial categories was reignited. "Truthfully, I feel very fortunate, and equally proud to be both African American and Asian. The critical and fundamental point is that ethnic background and/or composition should not make a difference. It does not make a difference to me. The bottom line is that I am an American . . . and proud of it!" said Woods (Brand-Williams, 1997, p. 1).

For the record, Woods is Thai, Chinese, African American, Caucasian, and Native American. But his mother, Tida Woods, says Tiger "is more Asian." By way of explanation, she added, "A mother raises her son, and he had an Asian mother." Although these diverse groups have been quick to claim Woods as their own, he has been reluctant to address the question of which group he identifies with the most. Woods standard response is that he is a product of all his backgrounds. He has said that he does not want to deny any part of his heritage. Despite numerous requests for interviews by ESPN, Woods declined to discuss the matter any further. However, Karen Narasaki, executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium stated, "Tiger Woods can call himself what he wants to call himself—to most of America, he's black. Asian American groups have thought to give him awards, but as far as I know he hasn't showed up to pick up one up." Narasaki noted that Woods has shown up to receive awards from African American organizations. "He can say he cares about it, but I don't know from his perspective what it means be Asian American. He's never characterized himself as Asian American. It's his choice" (Garber, 2002). However, stated Tida Woods in an ESPN interview in 1997, "I have taught him since he was young, his heritage and where he comes from. So he knows who he is. And those people who don't accept that, it's their problem" (Garber, 2002).

In Parker's *Washington Post* article, she stated, "Understand. It's not that we don't respect Tiger Woods's right to call himself a Cablinasian. We just don't think it will help him get a cab in D.C." (p. F4). Woods invented "Cablinasian" as a description of his racial composition that is Caucasian, black, Native American, and Asian. Additionally, older African American golfers, notably Calvin Peete and Jim Dent, have criticized Woods for not acknowledging that he is a black golfer. Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune* stated, "There's a tug of war over Tiger Woods, and sometimes the tug of war is inside the same people. On the one hand, they want to embrace Tiger as their hero, the hero of their group. On the other hand, they want to reject Tiger Woods' belief that he doesn't belong to just one group" (Garber, 2002).

Woods as a multiracial man is primarily composed of two minority ethnicities, African and

Asian. For him to self-identify exclusively as an African American would be to deny his Asian mother, who might have had more to do with his upbringing than his father. For him to say that he is an Asian American would be to deny his father. He does not have a single heritage. What many people find it difficult to understand is that when an individual is composed of two minority ethnicities it can be even more challenging to navigate the issue of racial self-identification than it is when you are biracial composed of Anglo American and African American. For most biracial individuals, who are Anglo American and African American, particularly when their phenotype appears to resemble a black person (i.e., Barack Obama, Halle Berry, and Lenny Kravitz), it would be unlikely that they would be perceived as an Anglo American; this helps individuals navigate the issue of self-identification and connect them with the community that will embrace them. On the other hand, when the biracial individuals' phenotype is more Anglo American than African American (i.e., Malcolm Gladwell), for these individuals to self-identify as Anglo-Americans to the exclusion of their African American heritage would imply tacit agreement with the prejudicial ranking system that has been a destructive force in our nation. When an individual is composed of two minorities and raised in both cultures (i.e., Tiger Woods), it is an unreasonable expectation that the individual should self-identify with only one culture.

For African American communities that are marginalized and underprivileged, it matters that one of their own succeeded and for them to then recognize those communities. In the United States, many might perceive a young African male as a criminal rather than the world's best golfer. This is why African Americans want Woods to self-identify as an African American; he could then help to dispel these racial stereotypes. On the other hand, Asian Americans, unlike African American athletes, have yet to make a profound impression on professional sports. Therefore, Woods receives pressure from Asian American groups for him to self-identify with them (Garber, 2002).

Woods rarely speaks out about race relations, and he has received criticism for this as well. His chief goal is to win as many golf championships as possible. However, he has spoken about his racial identity when he said:

> I became aware of my racial identity on my first day of school, on my first day of kindergarten. A group of sixth graders tied me to a tree, spray-painted the word "nigger" on me and threw rocks at me. That was my first day at school. And the teacher really didn't do much of anything. I used to live across the street from school and kind of down the way a little bit. The teacher said, "Okay, just go home." So I had to outrun all these kids going home, which I was able to do. It was certainly an eye-opening experience, you know, being five years old. We were the only minority family in all of Cypress, California. . . . But it was very interesting, though people don't necessarily know it, that I grew up in the 1980s and still had incidents. I had a racial incident even in the 1990s at my home course where I grew up, the Navy golf course. And right before the 1994 U.S. Amateur, I was eighteen years old, I was out practicing, just hitting pitch shots and some guy just yelled over the fence and used the N word numerous times at me. That's in 1994. . . . Being black is just looked at differently. And in this country I'm looked at as being black. When I go to Thailand, I'm considered Thai. It's very interesting. And when I go to Japan, I'm considered Asian. I don't know why it is, but it just is. It shouldn't be about that but it is, unfortunately, because the world is becoming more global and more interconnected through all the different information streams, we're still very separate and distinct. (Barkley, 2005, p.6)

Future Implications

Despite the fact that America as a nation still struggles with the issue of race and racial categorization, for more and more of its citizens, racial boundaries are ceasing to be as important as they once were. My own marriage is representative of the increased rate of intermarriage between Anglos and minorities and among minorities (such as African American and Asian). These marriages now rival those of second-generation immigrants whose parents came to America in the decades near the turn of the last

century. Intermarriage among the descendants of those early immigrants, such as a marriage between an Irish American and an Italian American, over time all but erased ethnic stereotypes that once defined white Americans. Where white ethnicity was once a salient feature in American life, the 1990 census found that only one in five white couples share the same ethnicity (e.g., an Italian married to an Italian; Fletcher, 1998).

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

Although a "multiracial" category was not included in the 2000 census, the Census Bureau changed its rules to allow people to identify themselves by as many as five official racial reporting categories, as they see fit. According to Census 2000, 6.8 million people, or 2.4 percent, reported more than one race. Of the total *two or more races* population, the overwhelming majority (93 percent) reported exactly two races. An additional 6 percent reported three races, and 1 percent reported four or more races. According to Census 2000, of the total two or more races population, 40 percent lived in the West, 27 percent lived in the South, 18 percent lived in the Northeast, and 15 percent lived in the Midwest. Data on race have been collected since the first U.S. decennial census in 1790. Census 2000 was the first decennial census that allowed individuals to self-identify with more than one race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). When Tiger Woods filled out the Census 2000 form he had the opportunity to recognize each of his inherent cultures. He could have checked five boxes. Whether Woods checked all five boxes is not known, as this is not public information (Garber, 2002). However, generally when asked to check off boxes of racial designations, he generally chooses two, African American and Asian, based on his primary cultural roots. On the 2000 Census only 8,637 of 281,421, 906 individuals reporting claimed five different heritages. California, Woods's home state, was the only one in the country to have more than one million people officially list themselves as multiracial. Results of Census 2010 will be dissected for years.

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

Similarly, half of the children of white fathers and Native American mothers were identified as white, and more than half of the children of white fathers and Japanese or Chinese mothers were listed as white in 1990 (Waters, 1990). "There is no telling as yet how the children of interracial unions will identify themselves in the future, as their concepts of racial identity become more fluid" (Fletcher, 1998).

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

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

Further challenging the notions of racial boundaries, Davis (1991) suggested that 75 percent to 90 percent of black Americans have white ancestors and possibly 1 percent of white Americans—millions of people—have black ancestors (presumably without knowing it). In the *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, it was

reported that 10 percent to 15 percent of white Americans have some black blood in them (Page, 1997), a marked increase since 1991. This presupposes that there is more heterogeneity in our population than we even realize.

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

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

Conclusion

With rapid globalization, multiracial people and families will increase and racial pigeonholing will become less possible. My family looks like a meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. Tiger Woods's family is nothing if not diverse. His mother is Thai, his father was African American, and his ex-wife is Swedish. His children are multiracial. I applaud Tiger Woods's attitude toward race and for not succumbing to pressure from African American or Asian American groups who want him to self-identify as either African American or Asian American. He is both. I and other researchers advocate for a less exclusionist form of racial identification and self- identification (Buiter, 2008).

Although President Obama self-identifies as African American as do his wife and daughters, his extended family is multicultural. His mother and maternal grandparents were Anglo Americans, his father was a black Kenyan, his half-sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng was born to an Indonesian father and is married to a Chinese Canadian, and his other half-siblings were born to his father and a Kenyan mother.

Race is a fundamental irrelevant category. Classification by color does not lend itself to increased understanding. Ideally, we should dismantle the racial classification scheme that has primarily benefited white America and perpetuated the oppression of certain people. Just what would replace it for social, political, or economic reasons is not totally clear, but if some kind of grouping is necessary then it should be something that identifies people more by their culture than by their race or color. White people who are Irish and those of Greek descent are culturally different. Black people from the United States, France, and Zimbabwe are vastly different in many important ways of describing a person, but they all are called black. This became evident when several prominent black voices criticized Obama as not being "black enough" because his cultural background is considered by some to be more Anglo, Hawaiian, and Indonesian because his African father left when he was two and he was raised more by his Anglo mother, her parents, and an Indonesian stepfather (Lee, 2008). I, too, have been criticized by some African Americans as not being black enough.

As diligent as I was in finding and developing my black identity, I would prefer to define myself as multiethnic because it is more accurate and inclusive of all of my cultural roots. Additionally, I would opt to rename myself as a rejection of the rule of hypodescent (one drop rule) because I am as much Native American as I am African American. Until now, multiethnic people, like me, have not been afforded the luxury of celebrating their total origin in deference to the laws that dictated what they could call themselves (Thompson, 1996). Renaming myself would allow me to embrace all of my ethnicities and the cultures of each. In this way I can identify myself by my whole self, rather than just by a part.

My motivation in renaming myself should not be interpreted as distancing myself from my African

American ancestry. It is not a denial of any part of me but an embracing of every part. Frankly, there are those in my position who resent being forced to identify themselves in one category and thereby exclude significant cultural roots. I am extremely proud of my African American heritage and celebrate it much more than my other cultural backgrounds. I am not seeking a more favorable ranking than blacks. There are some individuals who tend to deemphasize the African American aspect of their identities because of the continual stigma attached to being black in America (Daniel, 1992; Gibbs, Huang, & Associates, 1989; Poussaint, 1984; Root, 1992). For me this is arguably not the case, for to do this would be tacit acceptance of and agreement with the prejudicial ranking system that has grown out of the permeating racism in this country. I do not object to being referred to as African American, however, I believe that we should bring the name "multiethnic" into common usage. In truth, I am Native American, African American, and Anglo American. I am a woman of color. True egalitarianism would free me to embrace all of my cultural heritages without worrying that this would be interpreted as a defection from my African American ancestry.

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

There must be a way that multiethnic and biracial individuals can embrace all of their ethnicities without sharpening the stratification among individuals who are of African descent or engendering the kind of criticism that Tiger Woods has received. It is not my intention to exacerbate and perpetuate the divide between blacks of African phenotype and genotype and those who more approximate European phenotypical traits. I am concerned that colorism is also an integral part of this hierarchical system and that social status is somehow ascribed by the lightness of one's skin. The prejudicial treatment of same-race people based on their color has been a divisive issue among blacks. As Guinier and Torres (2002) stated, "Thus, the individual who is raced as dark-skinned and classed as poor may be trapped and made to feel less worthy not just by those in the white majority but by others in the community of color" (p. 85). This is a personal source of consternation given the history of friction between black women of lighter hues and those of darker hues based on the perceived preferential treatment of the former. My multiethnic identity should be a nonhierarchical identity.

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

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

If we abolish race as the predominant categorizing system, then perhaps multiethnic and biracial individuals could more easily embrace and celebrate

all of their ethnicities. Recently, while I was conducting a discussion of intercultural communication, one of my female students stood up and said, "I am Sioux." She then went on to describe the Native American culture and I thought, "I should know you. You are my sister, too." Essayist Clarence Page (1997) of the *Chicago Tribune* commented, "If people cannot call themselves what they want to call themselves, they cannot call themselves truly free."

ENDNOTE

1. *Multiethnic* and *multiracial* are used interchangeably. *Anglo* and *white* are used interchangeably, as are *African American* and *black*. Anglo is the cultural designation and white is the informal racial designation. The use of the uppercase *B* in the word *Black* when it refers to African Americans and the use of the uppercase of *W* in the word *White* when it refers to Caucasians are used by some writers. I chose to not to change these writers' uses and this explains the lack of uniformity.
2. Biracial refers only to the experience of having parents with two distinct racial identities, in most instances, when one is black and one is white. *Multiracial* and *multiethnic* refers to the experience of having parents with multiple racial or ethnic identities.
3. *Interracial* refers to the relationship between two monoracial persons who have different racial identities. *Interethnic* refers to the relationship between two monoethnic persons who have different ethnic backgrounds.

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