

The Minority Problem: The Effect of My Racial Ambiguity on My Adolescent Identity Development

Maya Todd

Writing 101: *Coming of Age & Happiness*

Instructor: Sheryl Welte Emch

Prologue

I have spent my whole life grasping at different racial identities. My mother is a Chinese Jamaican immigrant, whose parents died before I could remember them, and my father is a midwestern white man. Being second-generation mixed race and holding few cultural ties to any part of my extended family, I have never been able to fully identify with one racial, ethnic or cultural identity. Identity development often hinges on the ability to find an ingroup and a natural choice for this group is race. I am Chinese, Jamaican and White, yet I do not feel that I have a true claim to any of these identities.

The concept of racial identity appears to be rooted in community. Therefore, it translates that any monoracial member of that group has the perceived power to tell me, “No, you don’t belong here.” This power comes from the fact that they have a “full claim” – a more established community membership – to their racial identity, whereas mine is deeply fragmented. Even throughout writing this case study, I have been wary of crossing these poorly defined lines. I feel a constant anxiety that whatever race I find myself identifying with, because society often demands that I pick one, will be taken away from me and there is nothing I can do about it because they are right. I do not share all the cultural and societal experiences of any racial group and perhaps it is not my place to speak on their behalf.

As of this moment, I’m not sure if I am allowed to identify culturally with any of the groups to which I am genetically linked nor am I sure what a multiracial identity truly looks like in America. This case study explores my process of discovery.

Profile

Age 7

I examine the paper in front of me with dissatisfaction. My stick figure family stares back, my mom with her brown hair and skin the same color, my dad with brown hair and white skin, and me in the middle – *I’m green, obviously, because green is my favorite color.* Despite the green, the lines are far too thick and wobbly for my taste, so I throw my crayon to the ground in protest.

Deciding that the floor is too far to go to retrieve said crayon, I tune into the conversation happening at my table. Seated in a circle around me are Kate, Dominick and Josh. Dominick seems to be explaining to Kate that the only Disney movie he likes is *Mulan* because he is Chinese.

“I’m Chinese too!” I jump in, excited to have something to contribute.



Maya Todd

The topic discussed in this essay is one of great personal significance, however, it is not one I had ever taken the time to investigate. My racial ambiguity has always played a role in my life, but I simply had other things on my mind such as grades, sports, or friends. I am grateful for the opportunity to dedicate the necessary time to this topic. While it is cliché, college is a time of defining one’s own identity and processing my racial identity is crucial to my ability to do that. Throughout middle and high school my racial ambiguity was something I thought I could ignore; I would tell myself, it’s not like it really matters anyway. I believed that by ignoring what made me different I could pretend it didn’t impact my life. It took the reflection of this case study for me to recognize that it was already impacting my life without my acknowledgement.

The exploration I did regarding this case study also provoked new thoughts on how I perceive and interact with society. I find this topic to be especially interesting when looked at through the lens of modern culture. I remember, years ago, seeing a cover of *National Geographic* with the face of a woman who looked more like me than any other magazine cover I’d ever seen. The cover article stated that this is what the majority of Americans born in 2050 would look like. However, I saw this article in 2013, and to this day have never met another person whose racial background is as mixed as mine. They are certainly out there, yet few and far between. Interracial marriage was not legal until 1967 in the U.S., meaning that my parents, born in 1971, were the first generation to grow up in a society where interracial relationships were normalized. Therefore, Gen Z is the first generation to see a large spike in interracial babies, with most of these children being the product of two monoracial parents. These mixes are often fetishized and claimed, to some degree, by both racial groups. However, as a society we have not started to ask questions about what we will do with our children. Even further down the line, what will I tell my own children?

Given that my mother is mixed, Chinese-Jamaican, and I was born in 2002, I fall a bit out of the usual boxes for racial identity. My face may be the future, but during my lifetime people have been unsure what to do with me. Can the child of someone who is already mixed still identify with any of the groups that make up their race? Or are they too far removed to be afforded this connection? The answer based on my personal experience has been a lifetime of mixed signals.

I want to thank Sheryl Welte-Emch for the incredible class, *Writing 101: Coming of Age and Happiness*, which produced this work and for her mentorship throughout the publication process. Without you Sheryl I would never have been comfortable sharing this work, thank you.

“No, you’re not,” Dominick snaps.

“Yes, I am,” I reply, nodding my head and smiling assuredly at my classmates.

“You don’t look Chinese,” he retorts.

“Yes, I am. My grandma is from China. She’s dead, but I’m still Chinese!” I respond, sounding more petulant than I intended.

“I don’t believe you. You shouldn’t lie. Lying is bad!” he shouts back. At this I get up and run to the hallway to cry.

The next morning, I arrive at school with a picture of my grandma in hand. *This will show him.* My eyes search the playground and immediately find my target. I make a beeline for Dominick across the basketball court with fierce determination and shove the picture in his face. *Ha!*

“See, I *am* Chinese,” I say proudly, punctuating my words by pointing at the distinctly Chinese woman in the photo.

“No one likes a liar,” he says before turning and walking away.

My heart falls.

Age 13:

I look just like Anne Hathaway. I tell myself while giving one last twirl to the fingerprint blurred mirror in the corner of my painfully-7th-grade bedroom.

I look just like Anne Hathaway in the Princess Diaries. I repeat while my heart swells with pride and satisfaction at the glide of my fingers through my freshly straightened silky hair.

I look just like Anne Hathaway in the Princess Diaries after her princess makeover changes her from a curly-haired loser into the straight-haired Princess of Genovia. I echo while grabbing my bag and running towards the daily middle school carpool. It is impossible to control the smile spreading across my face as I climb into the Honda Pilot and greet my friends. I didn’t tell them that I was going to get my hair straightened over the weekend, so I find myself rushing through the pleasantries eager to get to the part where they compliment my new look. The words “it’s permanently straight this time” are practically bursting from my lips. *They’re finally going to think I’m pretty. How can they not? I look like them now.*

My heart sinks a little bit when I receive nothing more than a passing comment tossed back from the front seat by Hailey’s mom. *They’re just jealous. I’m sure everyone will be talking about it when they see me at school.* I don’t participate in the conversation going on in the car. Instead, I focus my eyes on the trees out the window filled with anticipation.

My math class is at the top of the stairs on the 4th floor, so I arrive out of breath and tell my friends to walk in ahead of me while I recuperate against the wall to the left of the door. I replay the vision of my entrance in my head. *I arrive just as the bell rings. All the heads turn towards me as I walk through the door, eyes comically large with appreciation for my shiny, flowing, straight hair. I let it fall into my face and flash a small smile at my peers – just like Anne Hathaway in the Princess Diaries. I sit down and spend the class bashfully responding to compliments.* I run through it again. It’s a foolproof plan.

The bell jolts me out of my thoughts. *Show time.* I push past the door and the only head that turns is my teacher who has already begun the lesson and spares a



moment to shoot me a disapproving look. I take the hint and move quickly to my seat. The class continues with no eyes wide with appreciation and no compliments to respond bashfully to.

Maybe I don't look like Anne Hathaway.

Age 15

I had been confused when I read the invitation announcing that the bat mitzvah was going to be at the University of Michigan Basketball Stadium, but now that I'm on the court-sized dance floor the genius of the idea is becoming clear. The circle of my friends bounces, albeit slightly offbeat, to the 10th y2k throwback of the night. My face hurts from smiling for so long, but it's a feeling I wouldn't wish away.

The DJ changes the song and with it the genre from Pop to Rap. I don't know this song, but my friends seem to. I mumble while they rap along pretending to know it too. While the song plays, my mind floats back to the pictures we took in the bathroom mirror. *I looked great, just like Beyonce in this dress.* I remember the way that my friends' pale skin and blonde hair created a flattering contrast with my sunkissed glow, and I smile. *Those are going to look great on Instagram.*

My attention snaps back to the present as my friends begin to cheer and sing louder in response to the MC who just appeared at our group. He is a large black man, with a large flat brim hat worn at an angle, which I assume is part of the themed 2000s persona. His voice booms across the crowd hyping up my small circle of friends, and soon he is pointing the mic towards our group. I pretend to know the words again as we crowd around the outstretched hand. Suddenly, the mic is yanked away—

—“Ope, almost caught ya there!” he says, looking directly at me. *Huh?* His smile is wide, but uneasy and his eyes are hard. An unexplained feeling of nervousness washes over me as I replay the last few seconds in confusion. *Shit. He thought I was going to say the n-word.*

My mind grinds to a halt as he moves on to the next group. Two thoughts rise simultaneously. Firstly, *of course I wasn't going to say it!* Secondly, and far more destabilizing than the first, *he thinks I can't say it.*

The first emotion is accompanied with a feeling of embarrassment that this man was given the impression that I planned to say it. However, that embarrassment is put on the backburner as the implications of the second hit me. *If he thinks I can't say the n-word, then that means he doesn't think I'm light skinned. Black people usually assume I'm light skinned. Am I light skinned? Can that mean mixed? No, those are different. Am I even mixed? Yes. I'm mixed, just not in the traditional black and white sense of the word. He thinks I'm white.* My heart rate rises as these thoughts give way to a wave of shame, rejection, and a sense of being found out. I'm drowning in it.

Age 16

The bell cuts through the raspy voice of my English teacher's lecture on Animal Farm. He sighs, “Well, I guess that's it for the day. Remember to read chapters 3 through 5 by Monday. Also Maya, can you come to my desk when you are finished packing up?” My heart speeds up in my chest as I quickly shove my books into my bag and walk up to the front of the classroom. *Did I do something wrong?* I stand in front of his desk for about 45 seconds as he shuffles papers, unaware of my presence, until he finally looks up when I clear my throat.

“Congratulations, you've been selected for the Rising Scholars Program! I highly recommend that you consider joining, it can be very helpful for students like



you.” He smiles, and despite not knowing what this program is I find myself feeling proud. Sensing my confusion, he casts his eyes about the disorganized desk between us searching for a paper which he then holds out to me.

“Thank you!” I say with a nod, “I’m excited to look into it.” I smile while I retrieve the paper and head out the door to the left. When I get into the hallway I finally look down at the paper, which turns out to be an acceptance letter.

Congratulations!

You have been nominated by a teacher to participate in the Rising Scholars Program! This is a prestigious program aimed at giving exclusive tools and resources to promising students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds. Our program includes college counseling, free SAT prep and unique leadership opportunities.

Please contact Risingscholars@aps.k12.us to accept this offer.

The excitement I had felt in the classroom slowly melts away and my mind bounces back to my teacher’s words, “students like you.” *I don’t think this was meant for me.*

I’m proud of my multiracial background, and I don’t feel disadvantaged.



“I don’t think I should take this,” I tell my mom as I watch her eyes skim over the invitation.

“Of course, you should. This program was made for students like you,” she finally responds with confusion. *There it is again, “students like you.”*

“But... I just don’t think that I fall into the category of people who are disadvantaged. I mean, you and Dad are educated. He is a doctor and professor, and I’ve always had access to the tools I needed. I don’t understand how this program applies to me.” I say the last part with slightly more

frustration than warranted.

“Maya, you are my daughter. That means that you are a minority, which I’m sure you are aware of. I didn’t even go to school until 4th grade because my parents were afraid someone would notice that we were in this country illegally. You do not come from a line of college graduates. And physically, you are obviously not just white. Let these people help you. Do you see many people that look like you around? Representation matters. Just accept that you are being given the opportunity to be on an even playing field, and take it,” she explains. *I don’t think she understands what I’m trying to say. Do I even understand what I’m trying to say?*

“Okay,” I reply, more confused than before and unable to shake the feeling that I was doing something wrong.

Age 19

The world whirls around me as I propel my spinny desk chair across my dorm room, trying to distract myself from the barrage of questions coming from my mom. “It makes me sad that you are sad,” she finally says, her voice coming across the speaker phone.

“Well, I’m not really sure what to say about that. I am also sad that I’m sad. I just don’t have anything to do. I haven’t found a good extracurricular group, and it’s a bit too late to join things at the end of October,” I reply, resigned to the consequences

of my choices not to join any social based organizations.

“Why don’t you join a cultural organization?”

“I can’t–” I respond automatically. “I wouldn’t belong. We wouldn’t even have anything to talk about,” I confess. The weight of the statement making me feel raw and lost.

Analysis

My experience of racial identity development has been characterized by the moments of recognition surrounding a fragmented claim to one racial group or another. The times that I tried to claim a racial identity and was rejected were pivotal in my exploration of my racial identity. Sarah Townsend et al., authors of *My Choice Your Categories: Denial of Multiracial Identities*, describe rejection from the group by members of the ingroup as “*identity denial*”. They define the term as the “general experience of having one’s group membership challenged by others” (Townsend et al.). The impact of identity denial continues to shape, and confound, the way in which I perceive my own identity. While my identity was challenged in many instances from the elementary school playground to the bat mitzvah dance floor, these experiences have, historically, been inconsistent with the experiences in which my identity has been affirmed.

The inconsistency in others’ reactions to my racially ambiguous features caused confusion in adolescence. While I may be accepted by some members of a group, I have my identity denied by others. The denial of this part of my identity produces feelings of, “shame, rejection and a sense of being found out” which I experience on many occasions (Townsend et al.). However, beyond the overwhelming sense of shame there is a lasting confusion on how to reconcile the interaction with others of a similar nature. I was once told that when people look at me they see a black girl, but others have told me that they couldn’t tell that I was a racial/ethnic minority. This dichotomy of perception is the reality of my lived experience. I am left in a state of constant self-doubt, fueled by the fear of identity denial, that leads to questioning if I have a claim to any racial group at all.

Perhaps I do have claim to my white, Jamaican and Chinese heritage in a general sense, but I will always stick out of a homogenous group of white people; I do not share the

same experiences of oppression or culture as a monoracial Jamaican, nor was I raised with traditionally Chinese values nor do I wrestle with stereotypes based on a distinctive Asian appearance. The emotions surrounding racial identity denial can also be associated with a term coined by NPR’s *Code Switch* as, “Racial Imposter Syndrome [which] refers to a feeling where someone of ‘mixed race’ doesn’t believe they have the right to truly claim any of the ‘races’ within them” (Donnella). The use of the word “believe” in the above definition implies that these feelings of not belonging are not reflective of the actual veracity of their claim to any race. I would counter that my experiences have yet to lead me to the same conclusion.

The presence of Racial Impostor Syndrome is clear in my bat mitzvah experience, where I was faced with the rejection of an identity I had previously been assigned by an external source. For years, when classmates proclaimed me a light skinned African American, I simply accepted the perception and moved on. My personal definition of my own race was, and remains, convoluted, so I was not deeply bothered that others attempted to label me. I noted that the Black demographic was most likely to label me as Black, so, after years of reinforcement, the message I received was

black people perceive me as light skinned. When that notion of other’s perceptions of me was shattered, I felt the fear on which Racial Impostor Syndrome is founded: the fear of being discovered as a fraud.

The particularly jarring aspect is that in this instance it was true to some degree. I am not African American, I am Jamaican. The dividing line between the two groups is ethnic as opposed to racial, with ethnic pertaining to language and culture while race is a combination of physical appearance and aggregate behavior (Bryce). I still do not know if my claim to my Jamaican heritage is more racial or cultural due to growing up isolated from both communities. The colloquially ill-defined line between the two has been a contributing factor to my confusion. Educated reflection can illuminate my Black identity but compounding Racial Impostor Syndrome and identity denial can cloud understanding of past experiences. However, I do know that I experience a large degree of privilege which separates me from the unified racial struggle faced by darker members of these two groups.

I grew up in a predominantly white area with no



Jamaican community and a community of people of color (POC) which was dominated by the African American demographic; therefore, if you were a POC, you were probably African American. These were the circumstances under which I matured to the age that I learned about the concepts of race and ethnicity. It follows that without anyone explicitly explaining to me what I was the way I identified myself was unclear. All I knew was that I stood out because I looked different. My existence provoked questions. Eve Willadsen-Jensen and Tiffany Ito provide context for this lack of clarity in a study comparing the responses to racially ambiguous faces in conjunction with Black or white faces. They found that, “a contrast effect was observed, with racially ambiguous faces perceived as more prototypical of Blacks and eliciting more negative implicit evaluative associations when viewed within a context of White faces” (Willadsen-Jensen & Ito). My sense of not blending into the predominantly white community comes from the observed effect: The more others looked the same the more I stood out. While I never considered myself an African American, I had internalized the idea that I was perceived that way based on the collective status as ‘other’ in a predominantly white community.

As a POC, I was happy to accept the label, but more than that I was using “racial malleability [...] as coping strategy for experiences of identity invalidation” (Newcomb, 39). This phenomenon of racial malleability means presenting and accepting racial labels based on the surrounding circumstances. Since I have spent much of my life being misidentified by others, I have grown tired of justifying my existence and facing the anxiety of identity denial. Instead of fighting the miscategorization, I have fallen into the more passive role characterized by racial malleability. The authors of another paper investigating this phenomenon concluded that, “race is a dynamic and interactive process [that] changes across situations, time, and depending on a number of top-down factors (e.g., expectations, stereotypes, and cultural norms)” (Pauker et al. 2). I feel that this accurately describes my personal relationship with race. The way that I present, or the group with which I feel the most closely identified, changes constantly based on surrounding circumstances. Defining a multiracial identity can be a very confusing and turbid path to navigate, but for me it has been the inevitable result of being simultaneously everything and nothing.

Bibliography

- Bryce, Emma. “What’s the Difference between Race and Ethnicity?” *LiveScience*, Purch, 8 Feb. 2020, <https://www.livescience.com/difference-between-race-ethnicity.html>
- Donnella, Leah. “Racial Impostor Syndrome: Here Are Your Stories.” *NPR*, NPR, 8 June 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/06/08/462395722/racial-impostor-syndrome-here-are-your-stories>
- Newcomb, Shirley A. “The Impact of Racial Miscategorization and Racial Ambiguity on Multiracial Identity and Well-Being: A Qualitative Study” (2017). Dissertations (1934). 737. https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/737
- Townsend, Sarah S., Markus, Hazel R., and Bergsieker, Hilary B. “My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities.” *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2009, pp. 185–204., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.01594.x>
- Willadsen-Jensen, Eve, and Tiffany A. Ito. “The Effect of Context on Responses to Racially Ambiguous Faces: Changes in Perception and Evaluation.” *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, vol. 10, no. 7, 2014, pp. 885–892. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsu134>