

Constructing Identity

By Stephanie Kyoko McKinnon

Most people are either one race or another. I am both, or neither. I am a hapa, the hyphen, the one who is constantly asked “what are you?”. Surprisingly, no one ever wants to know that my father is English, Scottish, and Irish, but why it is that I do not quite look white but not enough not to be white. They hear “my mother is Japanese,” nod their heads, and understand: “Oh, she’s *Asian*.”

But I am not. In fact, I did not know exactly what I was called, only that I was different, until the reality of my ambiguous race smacked me in the face while sitting in my “Art and Community” university class a few months ago. We were discussing art and identity when the conversation inevitably came around to race, as one of the founding pillars of identity for many people. I felt lost. How could I properly discuss race, let alone how it affects the creation and perception of art, when I do not even understand my own racial identity? I had been living in my own little bubble and was naively unaware that the term “mixed race” existed until this discussion. I recall listening to Amanda Marshall’s song “Shades of Grey” in 1999 and singing along without understanding that she was talking about looking like her *white* father as opposed to her *black* mother when she sang “When my grandmother held me for the very first time / She thanked God I looked like my daddy / And I never quite knew just what she meant / But I knew she was a little too happy.” While race may be something others can take that for granted, mine is something I needed to explore, internalize, and fully realize.

Berkeley, CA, 11 years ago:
Biracials chose the Hawaiian term “hapa” (from “hapa haole” meaning “half-white”) to describe all partial Asian/Pacific Islanders.
Howatson, Rob. “Face to face with hapa.” *Pacific Rim Magazine*.
<http://www.langara.bc.ca/prm/2000/hapa/Hapa.html>

I have always seen race in terms of colour. Growing up, most of the people I knew were white. My mom was yellow. I could place my friends easily on this colour spectrum but not myself. What is yellow and white mixed together equally? Light yellow? Beige, perhaps. I learned recently that all people who identify as “of colour” are called brown, but this merely confuses my spectrum. How do yellow and white make brown? Perhaps I missed the colour-mixing day in third grade art class.

All of our course readings had focused on art by and for monoracial groups; there was no mention of a mixed race community with whom I could identify, no middle ground. Although in 1981, Canada began to allow census respondents to report more than one ethnic origin, with “visible minority” as a self-identified category, people of mixed race are still do not have our own recognized classification. The Canadian census has an open answer space for ethnicity;

they also have a visible respondents are to check one mixed race are limited to constituent races (and thus, be visible minority heading” or counterparts) or the “visible

<p><i>Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2001:</i> Total Population: 29, 639, 035 Visible Minority Population (self-identified): 3, 983, 845 Multiple Visible Minority Population (self-identified): 73, 875 Visible Minority (not included elsewhere) (self-identified): 98, 920 http://www.statcan.ca/english/Pgdb/demo52a.htm</p>
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minority section where or more of ten boxes. Those of checking the box(es) of our counted under the “multiple with our monoracial minority not included

elsewhere” box. Unfortunately, the census definitions describe this box as designed for “respondents who reported a single write-in response indicating a Pacific Islander group (e.g., Fijian or Polynesian) or another single write-in response likely to be a visible minority group (e.g., Guyanese, West Indian).” Thus, it is not meant as a category for mixed race. When everyone is divided by race and categorized by colour, what happens to those of us who do not fit nicely into one of Canada’s ten pre-ordered, visible minority boxes?

I set about trying to unravel my identity crisis and put my fractured Humpty Dumpty self-image back together again. Mixed race is everywhere, although difficult to recognize. The Vancouver Art Gallery doesn't identify or even know the race of their artists because that could be construed as discrimination. Organizations such as the West Coast Poetry Festival Society attempt to avoid racialization by ignoring the race of their poets altogether. However, there are many resources available, particularly online, for those curious about mixed race, and there are many people willing to talk about race.

Not only mixed race people were willing to talk about their race and how it affected their art. I asked Ken Lee, a Cantonese commercial artist, Susanna Reinhart, a Chinese woman involved with the Cantonese opera in Vancouver, Ryan Andrew Murphy, an Irish Canadian social activist and artist, and Hank Bull, a British Canadian artist who has been making art for decades, about race, art, and identity. It was important for me not only to get a mixed race perspective, but also to understand how it differed from a monoracial standpoint. Both Lee and Reinhart emphasized the importance of the *culture*, as opposed to race per se, behind the traditional arts. Lee stated that “more traditional arts such as Asian calligraphy are more racialized due to tradition and the necessary, innate understanding of an entire culture required for every nuanced brushstroke.” However, one universal statement that Hank Bull made was that an important way to relate to others is through art. Art is a natural expression of identity, and one that others can experience. Therefore, mixed race *artists* would probably explore mixed race issues through their art and have a better grasp on what it means to be “mixed race”.

As true representations of mixed race individuals in mass media are not common, the realization, for a person of mixed race, that he or she is racially different often comes at the hands of another child. Fred Wah, an established mixed race poet and academic, writes in his

biotext *Diamond Grill* about an incident in elementary school and says, “Until Mary McNutter calls me a Chink, I’m not one”. It’s a show-stopping sentence. He captures the moment we change from being just like every other kid into one who is different simply because we look different. We become different because another child pointed to our physical dissimilarity and made us aware of it. When I interviewed Wah, he said that we live in and through these interpolations. Because the identity thrust on a mixed race person is often grounded in our “otherness”, we have to grapple against this construction in order to view ourselves as mixed and not simply “other”.

Michelle La Flamme, a mixed race artist and academic who has dabbled in many different art forms but works primarily in video and film, described in an e-mail how she constructed her identity. She wrote: “I live according to [coloured author] Maria Root’s “Rights for Racially Mixed People” and one of those rights is to choose how you want to identify. In the past when I did not know many artists of colour or people of colour outside of my family, I was more oriented towards *other* people’s perception of me. As I grew into my twenties and thirties I shifted my focus from how others see me to how I identify myself. Many mixed race people have written about a similar process and their work

U.S. Census:

“With enumerator observation [through 1950], a person of mixed White and other parentage was usually classified with the other race. A person of mixed race other than White was usually classified by the race of the person’s father through 1970 and by the race of the person’s mother in 1980 and 1990.”

Gibson, Campbell and Kay Jung. “Historical census statistics on population totals by race, 1790 to 1990, and by hispanic origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, regions, divisions, and states.” *U.S. Census Bureau.*

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0056.html#intro>

and my lived experience and work as an artists affected my change in perception.” As Hank Bull also asserted, it is important to create your own identity and not unquestionably accept external assumptions about you, even though it is simpler and easier to have your identity dictated to you. However, it is also impossible to ignore external perceptions.

In his “Politics of Recognition”, an article in the 2004 publication *Contemporary Political Theory: A reader*, political theorist Charles Taylor describes the dangers of misrecognition or nonrecognition, as he calls the phenomena when society fails to acknowledge and affirm our identity in various ways. Identity forms, in part, through the eyes of others, which inherently creates the risk of misrecognition or nonrecognition. However, if we are misrecognized, and assumptions are placed on us based not in our true identity, but from the stereotypes of another racial group, or we are nonrecognized, and our differences are ignored or discredited, then our identities do not receive the external validation they require to be viable. Taylor emphasizes the detrimental affect this can have on our well being.

Although they could not absolutely conclude that their findings were the result of a struggle with identity formation, in a 2003 article in the *American Journal of Public Health*, J. Richard Udry, Rose Maria Li, and Janet Hendrickson-Smith found that mixed race children had a higher risk for health and behaviour problems than single-race adolescents. This is despite their findings that mixed race children (which in this study were all biracial) have an experience between that of their two constituent race counterparts for nonrisk attributes, such as GPA, family structure, and family education. They also found that a parent who had a spouse of a different race did not necessarily view their child as mixed race.

U.S. Census:
Interracial marriage in
1960: 0.4% of all
marriages
Interracial marriage in
1992: 2.2% of all
marriages
<http://www.census.gov/poplulation/socdemo/race/interractabl.txt>

I tested this theory by asking my parents what race they thought I was. They dutifully responded, “of course you’re mixed”, but my father also replied that as parents they always see a part of themselves in their children. He recalled a time when someone referred to my brother, who looks arguably more Japanese than I do, as “that Chinese kid.” He was

shocked. He had never thought of us as Asian, or at least not as Asian-without-any-white. My

brother and I are equal composites of our parents, without one side being favoured over the other.

Ryan Andrew Murphy drew my attention to the concept of “white privilege.” He defined this in an e-mail as “any particular instance where someone has not been ‘racialized’ and has therefore experienced anything neutral or pleasant (in terms of institutional access, etc) that they may not have experienced (the same way) if they had been viewed as a ‘racialized other’.” He also suggested that the “neo-colonial...state is founded on these kinds of divisions” between people and that it encompasses but also extends further than the bounds of white privilege.”

However, by focusing on white privilege as opposed to white race, this emphasis on “whiteness” places a mixed race individual in an interesting dilemma. Occasionally, mixed race people are not identified as the “other” and can “pass” for white. Thus, we will experience both white privilege as well as racialization. The previous quotation from Wah’s *Diamond Grill* continues, “...Later, I don’t have to be because I don’t look like one.” Fred Wah, who in his early career was identified as an avant-garde, “white” poet, had 20 years of experience navigating the art world without being racialized before he was pushed into being a “Chinese” writer. He has felt both extremes of the race polarity (colour versus the absence of colour). While it may not be to the same extent as Fred Wah, a person of mixed racial heritage has the potential to encounter a situation in which he or she unconsciously exercises white privilege, as well as to encounter a situation in which he or she is racialized by other people.

However, both other people of colour and society at-large base the judgement of mixed race individuals on appearance and bloodline. Bi- or multiracial people must choose their category carefully, lest they be shunned by others in that category and discredited by the dominant culture. In his “Interview with Ashok Mathur”, Fred Wah states that he “never felt

comfortable claiming either the Chinese part or the Canadian part” of his heritage. He has claimed the hyphen space between Chinese and Canadian as his own; he has claimed “mixed race” as opposed to either one race or the other. Even if we are the misfits who are relegated to checking the “other” box when asked about race, at least it feels like a good fit. We will be stuck in the “other” box until society begins to recognize “mixed” as a category in and of itself. Right now, we cannot just be mixed. We are always a mix *of* something.

When I interviewed him, Fred Wah also pointed out that it has only been in the last ten to fifteen years that mixed race has been recognized and discussed. Even still, we have to borrow and adapt critical language developed by people talking about mixed culture. However, there are more and more mixed children growing up, looking around and recognizing themselves and each other as a distinct racial group that can be examined and explored. Eventually, we may yet acquire our own little box.

Amber Barton, a mixed dancer and choreographer, spoke about how a person of mixed race stands out physically and psychologically because he or she does not have the same background as his or her monoracial counterpart. Similarly, Michelle La Flamme touched on

America, 1967:
The last anti-miscegenation laws were struck down by the US Supreme Court in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*.
Ellis, Mark, Holloway, Steven, Houston, Serin, Hudson, Margaret, and Wright, Richard. “Crossing racial lines: geographies of mixed-race partnering and multiraciality in the United States.” *Progress in Human Geography*. 27(4). pp. 457-474.

how difficult it was for actors to get parts due to the desire for an “authentic” racial look. However, Barton asserted that our unique bodies lead to distinct movements and modes of personal expression. As a result of their background, a person of mixed race has a different understanding of certain relationships and how hard it can be for some people. Barton

gave the example of her own grandparents who were disowned by their parents for marrying outside of their own race, in the United States. The ramifications of this were powerfully evident

to her, and gave her a perspective and an emotional context that differ from that of a monoracial person.

As Fred Wah asserts, we, people of mixed race, have our own viewpoint, the dynamic hyphen space, from which we can question being mixed and which may provoke us to question the assumptions and perceptions on which our society is based. It is through this mixed race lens that he, as well as other artists, approaches culture and the world. Amber Barton may draw on her particular emotional context to interpret and create movement or use it as a starting point from which she can explore bigger issues. For an artist, being mixed race may very well form the content and the scope of a work, as well as be the catalyst that generates the desire to produce the art.

It is also through this mixed race lens that I can now approach art. If art is an expression of identity and an exploration of deeper questions or concerns the artist may have, then a solid foundation of my own identity, including race, is necessary to understand how the art speaks and relates to me. I will read a piece of Fred Wah's poetry and draw a correlation between the experience he is talking about and my own, no matter how tenuous the connection. A person who does not understand the hybrid experience that Wah is drawing from will understand his work from a much more detached and external vantage point, the same one I had before I began to comprehend my own racial identity. The clarification and better understanding of how I fit, or rather, do not fit, into my colour spectrum provides a better sense of the perspectives and biases I bring to dialogue. I have a better grasp of how both my racial anger and white privilege affect my opinion. With a clearer understanding of self, I will have a more informed way of interpreting society and the artistic expression it produces.

There is a community of artists who have carved out a mixed race niche for those of us who are following behind them. I can “be” both of my parents’ races without truly being either. I can be “mixed”, without feeling like the rope in a tug-of-war or like I am merely avoiding making a choice by sitting on the fence.

Now when I return to the classroom to talk about art and identity, I can feel more confident in my position as a person of mixed race and the unique viewpoint that gives me. I know that there are others in the same position as me, and that while everyone’s experience of racialization is different, we all face similar obstacles and issues. We should not be lumped in with one race or another and forced, as a result of misrecognition, to accept our fate. We are the “in between”. We do not fit into a polarized, categorized society. Sometimes it’s not just black or white, but the shades of grey in between that make life interesting. Especially if you exist as one of those shades.