Multiracial
The Kaleidoscope of Mixedness
hephzibah v. strmic-pawl
CONTENTS

Cover
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Acknowledgments

1 Multiracial America
   Introduction
   The Multiracial Movement
   How to Count the Mixed-Race Population
   The Social Construction of “Race” and “Multiracial”
   Using a Critical Race Theory Perspective
   Overview of Book

2 Defining Mixed-Race and Multiracial
   Mixedness: Part-White and BIPOC
   Common Multiracial Experiences
   Racial Identity Options
   Factors that Shape Multiracial Identity Adoption
   Is a Multiracial Identity Better?
   Conclusion

3 Race and Family
   Interracial Relationships
   Racial Socialization
   Adoption and Assistive Technologies
   Conclusion
   Note
List of Illustrations

Chapter 1
Figure 1.1 Largest two or more races by population (2019)

Figure 1.2 Largest two or more races by region (2019)

Figure 1.3 Largest two or more races by population (2020)

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Table 1.1 Identity referents

Chapter 2

Table 2.1 The four approaches

Table 2.2 Racial identity option and scholar(s)

Chapter 3

Table 3.1 White interracial marriage indicators

Table 3.2 Percentage of women in intermarriage by racial group (2016)

Table 3.3 Types of racial socialization

Chapter 4

Table 4.1 Segregation indices from Whites

Chapter 5

Table 5.1 Multiracial buying power
Multiracial

The Kaleidoscope of Mixedness

hephzibah v. strmic-pawl
To my parents, Charles Pawl and Mildred Strmic, who, when I doubted myself, told me to just let my freak flag fly
Acknowledgments

This book was an enormous task and took several years to write. A book that attempts to synthesize some of the most important scholarship on mixedness is a difficult feat; fortunately, my colleagues and friends provided necessary feedback and support along the way. Thank you to scholars-friends who gave pivotal advice, from the conception of this book all the way to the end: David Brunsma, Erica Chito Childs, Corey Dolgon, David Embrick, Baron Kelly, Zebulon Miletsky, Bhoomi Thakore, Milton Vickerman, and Rai Wilson. A particular special thank you goes to David Brunsma and Milton Vickerman who provided thorough comments and encouragement on particular chapters and the book as a whole. An additional large thank you is owed to Monica Keel, who aided in researching and organizing some of the referenced scholarship; Cris Castillo, who helped with researching contemporary data on the two or more population; and Lia Garcia, who provided key feedback on the book’s introduction. Many thanks also go to the (informal) Multiracial Identity Scholars Group which provides support and encouragement for the development of scholarship on mixedness and multiraciality.

Working on much of this book during the pandemic made for some arduous days of research and writing, which were ameliorated with support from my friends. They also listened to me talk about this project endlessly over the years. Thank you Steven Choi, Adebimpe Dare, Danielle Dirks, Jessi Frazier, Anthony Freeman, James Ganttt, Mark Iliffe, Meghan Johnston, Carmit Levité, Mary Beth Lineberry, Anthony Peguero, J. J. Pryor, Louise Rasmussen, Mike Russ, Damien Tillman, and Beth Williford.
I am also lucky to have a wonderfully encouraging family – a special shoutout to my parents and my siblings! And thank you to my mother, Mildred Strmic, who carefully and patiently provides edits on my writing. I imagine we all wish we had such a loving grammarian in the family.

And, finally, thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their feedback, and all the editorial staff at Polity who have assisted me throughout the years on this book project.
1 Multiracial America

Introduction

A field of studies known as “mixedness” or “multiraciality” has developed and rapidly grown since the early 1970s. This field is centered on the relatively new population categorized as “mixed” or “multiracial,” terms in reference to background and/or identification with two or more races. Recognition of this demographic is rooted in a groundswell movement that challenged the presumption of monoracial identification for children who have parents classified as different races. What started as a moderately small group of mixed-race families pushing for “multiracial” identification blossomed into a full-fledged movement, which then ultimately changed the way the US Census counts racial categories. In 2000, the Census began allowing people to “mark one or more” races, to choose as many racial boxes as fit their self-identification. Not long after, in 2008, attention to multiraciality was reinvigorated when the first Black president of the United States referred to himself as a “mutt” in reference to his parents’ Nigerian Black, White, and immigrant background (Fram 2008). Just over ten years later, the United States elected its first Black woman vice president who also openly honors her mixed heritage of immigrant, Jamaican Black, and Indian parentage. In a few decades, multiraciality has moved from community conversations to an organized movement to the largest stage in the world, and is changing the ways we think about racial identification and challenging strict divisions within the racial hierarchy.
The emergence of the contemporary “mixed-race” population began after the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case that made interracial marriage legal. By 1980, approximately 2.2% of the population chose a two-race ancestry on the Census, and in 1990 that population was 2.9% (Parker et al. 2015). In 1992, Maria P. P. Root, a founder of mixed-race studies, stated that the United States was facing a “biracial baby boom,” and in 1993 a *Time* magazine cover celebrated “The New Face of America,” which depicted a computer-generated woman made from a “mix of several races.” Then, in 2001, *Time* declared a “Eurasian Invasion,” referring to people who identify as Asian and White (as cited in Ifekwunigwe 2004; Teng 2013). By 2010, ten years after the first Census that permitted people to “mark more than one race,” the country had a grasp on how many people, officially, defied being placed in one racial category. In 2000, 6.8 million or 2.4% of the population chose more than one race, and in 2010 that number was 9 million or 2.9%, which reflects a 32% increase in just ten years. However, if one looks at the count by ancestry, not race, the numbers are even larger: 3.4% in 2000 marked a two-race ancestry, which climbed to 4.3% by 2010. The twenty-first century issued in a notable shift in the recognition of multiraciality. The multiracial author Danzy Senna declared the era the “Mulatto Millennium,” and a 2014 *National Geographic* celebrated its 125th anniversary with a cover devoted to multiracial people, with the title “The Changing Face of America” (as cited in Newman 2019a: 109; Senna 1998).

Indeed, it seems that the country is moving toward a “multiracial America.” In 2020, the “two or more races population” saw an amazing increase of 276% to 33.8 million people (Jones et al. 2021). Moreover, this growth in the numeric population has been matched with the embrace of a “Multiracial Ideology,” which purports that
the multiracial population is an antidote to racism in a number of ways: multiracials as a literal embodiment of racial reconciliation; multiracials as a vanguard of a demographic future where race is indeterminable because everyone is mixed; multiracials as people uniquely positioned to be bridge builders between different racial worldviews; and multiracials as particularly special, exotic, and beautiful. Law Professor Sheryll Cashin penned a *New York Times* opinion entitled “How Interracial Love Is Saving America” in which she states that “more loving and more activism could lead to the dismantling of stubborn structures born of supremacist thinking” (Cashin 2017). Multiracials themselves also seem to accept parts of this Multiracial Ideology: a Pew Research Center study reveals that 60% of mixed-race people report being proud of their mixed-race background, and 20% say being mixed is an advantage (Parker et al. 2015). This ideology has also permeated marketing: companies now choose mixed-race families to appear in commercials for seemingly everything, including cars, clothing, pregnancy tests, and even insurance ads (Block 2021; Chito Childs 2009; House 2021). Mixedness and multiraciality have become hypervisible because of the real demographic growth in the two or more population, but also because multiraciality fits with the contemporary moment in which diversity is sought as a solution to racism (Embrick 2019; Thomas 2020). This contemporary phenomenon of mixedness and multiraciality poses a broad set of implications for the understanding of race; *Multiracial: The Kaleidoscope of Mixedness* is an examination of these implications – on the individual, theoretical, and practical levels.

**The Multiracial Movement**
Historically, racial identity was an ascribed status – one assigned at birth and seen as permanent; some people were able to change their racial identity, but not without much effort and difficulty. In fact, until the 1950s, individuals were not even allowed to self-identify their race on the Census because enumerators, who recorded people’s responses, assigned a respondent’s racial group on the Census form (Prewitt 2013). However, even after enumerators were removed and racial identity became a personal choice, there was still the expectation that one’s racial group membership was assigned at birth via parental inheritance. Today, the option for multiracial identification changes all that. People who have parents, or grandparents – sometimes great-grandparents – of different races can now choose to identify with multiple races. In this way, multiracial identification contests long-held rules around race and creates space for racial identity to be an active choice. A grassroots movement of families precipitated this shift to multiracial identification.

Recall, prior to 2000, the US Census and other government forms restricted people to the choice of only one racial box; if people marked more than one box, their response was later consolidated into one (Pew Research Center 2020; Prewitt 2013). The movement to change the Census rules began in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The height of the movement was in the 1990s, at which point there were at least 30 active adult multiracial organizations and 7 main organizations pushing the movement forward: I-Pride is the oldest organization, which formed in 1979; the Biracial Family Network began in 1980; the Interracial Family Circle began in 1984; A Place For Us (APFU) in 1986; the Multiracial Americans of Southern California in 1987; Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA) in 1988; and Project Reclassify All Children Equally (Project RACE) in 1991. All of these organizations generally sought to
promote a safe space for interracial couples, mixed families, and mixed-race individuals by creating networks, educating communities about mixedness, and supporting multiracial identity choice.

AMEA, the largest and most well known of the groups, came together after 14 different organizations from across the United States met and elected the first executive committee, composed of Carlos Alejandro Fernandez, president; Ramona Douglass, vice president; and noted mixed-race scholar Reginald Daniel as secretary. AMEA’s primary goal was “education: to promote a positive awareness of interracial and multiracial identity, for ourselves and for society as a whole” (as cited in Williams 2006:9). Project RACE was founded in 1991 by Susan Graham, a White mother of biracial children who began her activism after she was greatly disappointed by the lack of a biracial category for her son. The primary objective of Project RACE was “to mandate a multiracial category on all forms requiring racial data” (as stated in Williams 2006: 9). APFU was founded in 1986 by Ruth and Steve White, an interracial Black and White couple, who were inspired to action after their minister refused to marry them. The couple then became ministers themselves and led APFU with a Christian focus (Curington 2016; Daniel 2002; Williams 2006). They framed their goal as one of “support and encourage[ment] of interaction between anyone involved with interracial relationships” (as cited in Williams 2006: 9). Another significant voice was that of Charles Byrd, who launched *Interracial Voice* in 1995 as an online venue to discuss multiraciality. Byrd also organized the Multiracial Solidarity March in Washington, DC, in 1996. The march did not attract many people, but in conjunction with the march, AMEA and Project RACE launched the first National Multiracial Bone Marrow Drive, which amassed significant attention (Brown and Douglass 2003). While
many of these organizations tended to have a focus on Black–White biracials, another group that was active was Hapa Issue Forum (HIF), created in 1992 in Berkeley, California. Run mainly by mixed-race Japanese children, HIF focused on finding ways to make multiracial Japanese feel more included in the Japanese American community, and on creating an inclusive environment for those of other Asian American backgrounds (Bernstein and de la Cruz 2009; King-O’Riain 2004). Another multiracial outlet was the MAVIN Foundation and magazine, started in 1999 by Matt Kelley, who identifies as Korean and EuroAmerican. The MAVIN magazine provided a space “dedicated to the mixed race experience,” and Kelley reflected on the importance of the moment in the Spring/Spring 1999 issue: “We’re on the verge of a national, collective mixed-race consciousness ... It finally seems like recognizing and identifying with our mixed-ness is legitimate in the eyes of greater society” (as cited in Steiner 2007).

With greater recognition of and support for multiracial identification, the movement increasingly turned its attention to the issue of a “multiracial” identity box on official forms. Mixed-race people and their families felt they should not be forced to identify with only one race. Yet tension grew as disputes on how to recognize the multiracial population emerged during talks with Census representatives. Many of these multiracial activist organizations found themselves opposing civil rights organizations that found the proposal of a multiracial category threatening to racial counts; the fear was that a decline in single-identity population counts would decrease funding for race-based programs and legislation such as Affirmative Action and the Voting Rights Act (Sexton 2008; Williams 2006). Some civil rights organizations even argued that a multiracial box would solidify the creation of a “buffer” racial group between Whites and people of color.
The Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, National Council of La Raza, National Urban League, National Coalition for an Accurate Count of Asians and Pacific Islanders, National Congress of American Indians, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) all opposed the implementation of a multiracial option on the Census. In response to these criticisms, AMEA suggested an umbrella multiracial category with the option to mark multiple boxes. On the other hand, HIF directly aligned with the civil rights organizations and supported a basic “check all boxes that apply” option; this option was seen as more desirable because it would provide a way to record multiple races but without taking away population counts from communities of color (Bernstein and de la Cruz 2009).

The final decision in 1997, outlined in Directive 15 under the US Office of Management and Budget, was to add the option of “mark one or more,” often known as MOOM, to the race question. Previously, this Directive specified 4 racial groups and 2 ethnic groups. The revision created 6 racial groups and, with the “mark one or more” option, there are now 63 different racial identities that can be reported (Williams 2006). While the MOOM addition was generally seen as a success, tension remained between civil rights groups and some multiracial organizations. Susan Graham of Project RACE was extremely displeased with the 1997 decision and stated that mixed-race children still did not have an identity represented on the Census, and that “opponents of a multiracial category” forced this compromise (Spencer 2006). Graham also showed some willingness to work with Newt Gingrich and other Republicans who supported multiraciality as an ideological route toward “post-racialism” (Brown and Douglass 2003). Today, a “Multiracial Category Movement” or MCM has persisted (Hernández 2018). Some states - including
Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio - have amended their forms and chosen to specifically use a “multiracial” category (DaCosta 2020; Hernández 2018). We are still seeing the multiracial movement evolve; we are living in it now. We are watching more people choose to identify as multiracial and seeing society increasingly embrace multiraciality. However, a formal counting of the “mixed” or “multiracial” population is difficult. Many people who have a mixed-race background choose to identify as multiracial, but many do not. In addition, some may have a mixed background but choose not to report it. So, how do we count the mixed-race population?

**How to Count the Mixed-Race Population**

Evaluating racial counts for any population is difficult because there are multiple ways in which “race” can be recorded. The formal measure for recording race is usually via self-report. The self-report measure is often seen as the best method because it gives agency to the individual, and, in this sense, it is presumed that an individual knows best. Yet, while it is important to recognize a person’s racial self-identification, there are other ways to assess racial identity. In addition to personal racial identity, there are five other ways to record race: racial self-classification, observed race, reflected race, phenotype, and racial ancestry.

*Racial self-classification* is one’s identification with a racial box *when restricted* to a set of formal options, most often on a census or other official government form. A person’s preferred racial identity may or may not be on a list of provided racial categories, so racial self-classification can be different from preferred racial identity. *Observed race*, also known as external racial identity, is other people’s determination of an individual’s race. How *others* perceive
a person’s racial identity is important because discrimination is often linked to external, not internal, identification. Reflected race is how individuals believe other people most often classify them. Reflected race is central because people may modify their interactions and identity based on what they think others think about them. Phenotype accounts for skin tone and other racialized physical features such as eyes, nose, lips, and hair. The presence or absence of certain phenotypical features can modify racial assignment – personal or assigned by others. Racial ancestry takes into account knowledge of one’s background through a family tree and/or ancestry test; information about ancestry can alter racial identity even if it runs counter to other evaluations based on phenotype or observed race (Harris and Sim 2002; Roth 2016). The six methods of evaluating racial identity can result in the same racial assignment across the board, or they can lead to different ones. Seeing how racial assignments can align or vary reveals the complicated ways that race is read and operates in real life. It also helps to explain how racial identity can vary based on the question asked of the person. Roth (2016) explains that people may provide different answers dependent on five different referents: (1) Identity, or one’s internal racial self-identification; (2) Self-Classification, or how one identifies on a closed-ended survey; (3) Observed Race, or how one is classified by others; (4) Phenotype, or how one appears to others based on skin tone and related features; and (5) Ancestry, or the race that is derived from one’s direct heritage. Using these five referents, one can easily predict scenarios where the race provided changes depending on the question – see table 1.1. This point is particularly salient for those of mixed-race background. For example, in Scenario 1, the person has a preferred racial identity as multiracial, but selfclassifies as White and reports multiple ancestry groups. In Scenario 2, the person also notes a mixed
ancestry but self-identifies as Black. The comparisons across these scenarios help one to understand a key complication in assessing mixed-race and multiracial population counts: estimates of the mixed-race population vary depending on the question asked.

**Table 1.1** Identity referents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referent type</th>
<th>Scenario 1</th>
<th>Scenario 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Classification</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed Race</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenotype</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancestry</td>
<td>Chinese, Filipino, and White</td>
<td>Black and Cuban</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best data we have on the “mixed” population come from the Census question that asks: “What is Person 1’s race? Mark one or more boxes,” followed by a list of races. The population that marks two or more racial boxes is denoted as the “mixed-race” population count. However, this population is quite frequently made synonymous with the “multiracial” population, even though people may mark more than one box and not identify as multiracial. Another potential complication is when people have parents of the same race, but they themselves identify with two or more races – whether because of a more distant mixedness or because their concept of race and racial identity leads them to identify with multiple races (these issues are discussed in depth in [chapter 2](#)) (Campbell 2007; Herman 2011). The point here is that the “two or more races” data point is used to reflect the “multiracial” population, but, in reality, the “two or more races” data point captures only those who wish to indicate affiliation with multiple races.
There are additional complicating factors to evaluating the mixed-race population. First, some “racial mixes” are more likely to report “two or more races” than others. One study indicates that the largest population that reports a mixed ancestry is American Indian–Whites, but this group is also the least likely to identify as multiracial (Parker et al. 2015). Second, identification with two or more races is not stable over time. Of those who mark two or more races, some shift from one census to the next between marking one race and multiple races, or to a different race from a previous one (Doyle and Kao 2007; Liebler et al. 2017). Yet another complicating factor is that of generational mix. When it comes to those of multigenerational mixedness, it is not clear how many generations a “mixed” identification lasts (Pilgrim 2020; Song 2017a). Most studies of mixed race refer to someone with immediate mixed heritage, whose parents are of two different races, but it is still unclear how the mixed-race population changes depending on whether someone has a one-quarter, one-eighth, or even one-sixteenth mixed ancestry (Bratter 2007). A Pew Research Center survey delved into the issue by asking people to report mixed ancestry in themselves or their parents or their grandparents; evaluating mixedness using different ancestral referent points yielded a total mixed population of 6.9 percent, much larger than the US Census count of 2.1 percent (Parker et al. 2015). These data indicate that many people may report mixed ancestry when directly questioned but do not choose to identify with multiple races and do not identify as multiracial. One more additional factor is the increase in transracial adoptions, where parents may share part, or none of, the racial identity of the adoptee. While transracial adoptees do not fit within the mixed/multiracial umbrella in the traditional sense, many of their experiences align with those of multiracials. There needs to be more consideration as to
how transracial adoptees should be incorporated into the mixed population (for more on this topic, see chapter 3).

With these complications and confounding factors, it is still not clear what method is the best for measuring the mixed-race population. Should we count only people who identify as multiracial, or people who mark more than one race, or should there be directions on a minimum amount of “mix” to be counted with the mixed-race population? Aspinall (2018) took a survey of censuses across the globe and discovered various means of counting the “mixed” population. New Zealand and Canada have used similar methods to that of the United States - their census asks people to mark all applicable boxes. England and Wales have offered specific mixed-race groups with “White and Black Caribbean,” “White and Black African,” and “White and Asian.” The Bahamas and Bermuda have listed “Black and White,” “Black and Other,” and “White and Other.” Similarly, Macau, a special administrative region of China, also has had specific mixed-race groups relative to their immigration history: “Chinese and Portuguese,” “Chinese, Portuguese, and Other,” “Chinese and Non-Portuguese,” and “Portuguese and Non-Chinese.” Other nations, such as Scotland and Northern Ireland, chose a write-in feature while others, such as Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, St. Lucia, and Jamaica, simply offered a “mixed” box. Some nations use a specific mixed term: “mestizo” in Belize, “mulatto” in Costa Rica, and “Eurasian” in Singapore. Although countries have tried different options, no one option is “best” because all of them are relevant to the nation’s history, racial/ethnic composition, contemporary migrants, political landscape, and socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, respondents will likely always face some confusion over terms used. The variety of attempts to enumerate mixed-race communities has led researchers to be more critical about how to record race in
general. As Davenport (2020) says, “social scientists need to be more conscious that racial categories are constructs that often fail to capture the diversity and fluidity of individual race ... scholars of race and ethnicity must be more attentive to the elasticity of racial group boundaries and the often continuous nature of race, and work to develop measures that better account for this continuity” (235).

The issue of how best to count the mixed or multiracial population is of serious consequence because the multiracial population count could vary widely – and population size is connected to a series of other issues such as formal representation on reports, perceived significance of the group, and opportunities for further advocacy. As stated earlier, some multiracial organizations are still promoting the adoption of a “multiracial” box, and future research needs to continue to consider the ways to best record the multiracial population while keeping in mind that monoracial population counts are tied to services and advocacy (The Leadership Conference Education Fund 2014). Although there currently is no “multiracial” population count, we rely on the “two or more” record as tabulated by the US Census Bureau.

**The Two or More Population Count**

The “two or more” population, as denoted on the US Census, is the best count we have to represent the mixed population. The two or more races population is the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group in the USA, and by 2060 it is expected to reach 11.3% of the population. Of the “two or more” population, the vast majority report only two races – at approximately 93% – which leaves about 7% who report three or more races: 0.09% of the total US population identify with three races, 0.01% with four races, and less than 0.01% identify with five or six races. Most of the
population also reports as part-White, with 86% of the two-race population reporting White and another race. Within the two-race, part-White population, the largest group is White and Black/African American at 28.97%, then White and Asian at 22.13%, White and American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) at 16.32%, White and Some Other Race (SOR) at 8.94%, and White and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (NHPI) at 1.8%. Among the two-race population that is not part-White, the largest groups are Black/African American and American Indian or Alaska Native at 2.64%, followed by Black/African American and Some Other Race at 2.33%, Asian and Some Other Race at 2.08%, and Black/African American and Asian at 1.94% (Jones and Bullock 2012; Jones and Smith 2001) (see figure 1.1). The two or more population also varies by age and by region. Most of the population is on the younger side with approximately 65% of the two or more races population under the age of 30. The two or more race population is also much higher in the West and the South, at nearly 4 million in the West and about 3.6 million in the South, compared to only 1.9 million in the Midwest and 1.7 million in the Northeast (see figure 1.2). Furthermore, the size of a particular mixed-race population varies within region. The South of the United States, with its foundation in plantation slavery and ardent defense of Jim Crow laws, now shows the biggest growth in the Black–White two or more races population; between 2000 and 2010, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama more than tripled their Black–White mixed population (Frey 2015). Currently, in the South, the largest two or more population is White and Black/ African American at 38%, while the White and Asian population is at 19%, but these rates invert when looking in the West where the White and Asian population is the largest, at 31% of the population, while the White and Black population is at 17%.
Figure 1.1 Largest two or more races by population (2019)

Initial data from the 2020 Census show a huge jump in the two or more race population, from about 9 million in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020. As of 2020, the largest two or more population count is White and Some Other Race at 19.3 million, while the White and Black population saw an increase in 1.2 million, or a 67.4% change (see figure 1.3). While some of this population growth is due to an actual increase in population, the Census expects “they were largely due to the improvements to the design of the two separate questions for race and ethnicity, data processing, and coding, which enabled a more thorough and accurate depiction of how people prefer to self-identify” (Jones et al. 2021). The Census also recognizes that racial counts reflect a social understanding of race, not a biological one. This socially constructed nature of race is essential to understanding mixedness.
The Social Construction of “Race” and “Multiracial”

Any conversation on multiraciality must contend with the origins of race, because multiracial only exists if monoracial exists, let alone “race” itself. However, both “race” and “multiracial” are social constructions, as will be clearly outlined in this section.
The Social Construction of Race

Many people believe the concept of race is thousands of years old, but in actuality race is a relatively new idea. The term “race” first emerged in the lexicon during the seventeenth century, but race as an idea rapidly grew into a powerful ideology (Wade 2015). When enslavement and genocide became tools of imperialism and colonization, a rationalization was needed to explain White Christians’ brutal oppression of fellow human beings. Originally, White Christians turned toward biblical narratives to explain racial difference, either adopting a monogenesis or polygenesis perspective. In the theory of monogenesis, White Christians believed that all people had the same origin story of Adam and Eve but that racial groups formed from environmental conditions, with Blacks experiencing the worst degeneration and Whites the least. The theory of polygenesis, adopted later in the 1800s and prominent in the United States, stated that races had different origins and Blacks were the lowest species; a common theory was that Blacks descended from Ham, who was cursed for seeing Noah naked (Daniel 2002; Harrison 2016). Later, as people began to turn to science for answers, race was instituted as a biological concept. Scientists evaluated skull size, body size, facial shape, hair type, skin tone, and other physical features in order to defend their ideological groupings of people into “races” (Gould 2006). The famous anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s 1779 racial classification has stayed with us: he delineated five races – Caucasian, Ethiopian, American, Malay, and Mongolian (Bhopal 2007). This belief in five general categories depicted as white, black, red, brown, and yellow spread, even getting adopted in Eastern societies such as China. Kang Youwei, a Confucian philosopher, alleged there were four races: whites in Europe, yellow in Asia, black in Africa, and brown of Pacific and South Sea Islands. Youwei
believed brown and black groups were inferior and argued for an amalgamation of yellow and white communities to combine the fair skin and beauty of Europeans with the intelligence, morality, and fertility of Asians (Teng 2013). Race became so institutionalized into government, politics, and social practice that it was continuously used to describe not only people’s physical features, but their abilities. Personality, intelligence, and general temperament characteristics were assigned to each group, and, although these characteristics varied throughout the years, the belief that racial groups were inherently different was stable (Omi and Winant 2014; Sussman 2014).

By the middle of the twentieth century, there was a scientific reckoning with past beliefs in the biology of race, and there was an increasing realization that race is nothing more than a construct created to sustain a racial hierarchy. By 1998, the American Anthropological Association declared race a social construct and noted that generations of migration and procreation made any idea of separate distinct human groups logically untenable. In 1999, the Institute of Medicine stated that race is a social construction, and when technology reached the pivotal point of mapping DNA in 2000, the Human Genome Project announced that humans are 99.9 percent the same in their genetic make-up; the 0.01 percent continues to be investigated to understand variation in diseases (NHGRI 2021). In 2020, the American Medical Association issued a press release, which included the following about race: “An understanding of race as a socially constructed category different from ethnicity, genetic ancestry, or biology,” with policies that “aim to end the misinterpretation of race as a biological category defined by genetic traits or biological differences” (American Medical Association 2020). Studies now indicate that a social assignment of race matters more
to health outcomes than a racial identity assigned by ancestry or genetic tests, because *race* shapes health through social interactions, not through genes (Roberts 2011; Roth 2016). The United States Census has had racial categories since the first Census in 1790, but the Census website now states that “the racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically” (US Census Bureau 2021).

If race is not biological, then what is it? “Races” are denoted by a common set of phenotypical characteristics that are assigned socially significant meanings (Omi and Winant 2014; Sussman 2014; Takaki 1993). In other words, races are categories meant to assess people who are *perceived* to share a set of physical features. We say “perceived” because no “race” can actually be described by one set of universal physical characteristics: people of all races have curly hair or narrow noses or a brown complexion. Thus, racial characteristics – physical or otherwise – are not essential to any one racial group. Furthermore, while the term “race” has been consistently used over the years, the classification of people into racial groups and how we think about those racial groups constantly shifts. For example, who counts as “White” today is not the same as in 1800, and how we think of the “White” racial group is very different from what it was 200 years ago. As Omi and Winant explain, race has to be understood as “an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (2014: 110). The emergence, or disappearance, of racial categories reflects attempts to racialize human bodies differently, and all “racial identities are socially constructed in a racist society” (Rockquemore and
Brunsma 2008: 11). The central takeaway here is that the idea of race is an outcome of the practice of racism.

It’s important to note that, although we know race is not biological, sometimes race is reinvigorated as a biological notion because of how people mistakenly conflate race. For example, the recent boom in ancestry testing is often mistaken as providing information on one’s racial roots, so that a test result that says “36 percent British” is read as “36 percent White.” In actuality, ancestry tests provide a sliver of information about whom one has biological connections to in another region of the world. And, more important, ties to ancestors or region are falsely equated as information on racial membership (Roth et al. 2020).

Another confounding issue is the use of race in health and medicine. Mixed Marrow, for example, runs bone marrow drives in order to get more “mixed-race” participants. There is, of course, a biological component to bone marrow as six antigens are needed to align for a successful match, but there is no such thing as “mixed blood” or “mixed marrow” (Hollenbach et al. 2015). Doctors also continue to use race as a proxy for estimating everything from lung capacity to heart disease to likelihood of genetic medical conditions. Some of this is just bad training, while others – such as the pharmaceutical company that sells BiDil, a heart disease drug marketed specifically to African Americans – use race as a marketing ploy to make more money (Roberts 2011). Continuing reinvigorations of race as biological, either implicitly or explicitly, make it all the more necessary to state, unequivocally, that race is a social construction.

**The Social Construction of Multiracial**

The term “multiracial” to represent more than one race has meaning only if there are “races” to mix. Thus, multiracial can imply race is a biological fact and that racial groups
are stable, unchanging categories. It is important then not only to detail the social construction of race, but also to trace a brief history of the creation of “mixed-race.” While many see today’s mixed-race and multiracial population as particularly new, it’s important to remember that contemporary multiraciality is just today’s manifestation of a long history of rules and regulations around interraciality and mixed-race offspring.

To understand today’s multiraciality in the United States, one needs to go back to the establishment of the country and look at regulation of interracial relationships. The United States was founded on plantation slavery, where the two most important categories for this racial capitalism were “White” and “Black,” or the correlated statuses of “free” and “slave.” To keep racial boundaries clear, there were strict laws known as anti-miscegenation policies that prohibited sexual relationships between racial groups. The term “miscegenation” was formed from the words “miscere,” which means “to mix,” and “genus” or “race,” to refer to mixed-race (Pascoe 2010; Yancey and Lewis 2008). Although these laws prohibited interracial relationships of any kind, the laws were enforced only when the stability of the racial hierarchy was threatened. For example, White men raped enslaved Black women regularly, but such sexual interactions were not patrolled because they did not threaten the racial order, as the status of White people was confirmed through this violence and any offspring were enslaved. In stark contrast, the line between White women and Black men was highly surveilled and violently punished. Whites believed the purity of a White woman had to be upheld, and sex with Black men was deemed abhorrent. Such examples of this racist double standard are evident in the lives of presidents of the United States who simultaneously supported plantation slavery, had enslaved people themselves, raped their enslaved women,