Identity Politics of Difference

Montgomery, Michelle

Published by University Press of Colorado

Montgomery, Michelle.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/55920

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2023126
PART III

UNDOING “INDIANNES”
The historic inauguration of our nation’s first mixed-race president, Barack Obama, has heightened the need to discuss the issues that surround the meaning of race. For many reasons, President Obama’s mixed-race background embodies the social and political gaps perpetuated by skin color and the material value of one’s mixedness. As President Obama states:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather, who survived a depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II, and a white grandmother, who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. (Obama 2008)

President Obama’s mixedness cannot be understood or assessed without a logical frame of reference. In multiple respects, identity choice among
mixed-race people who may have idealized attaining whiteness will only perpetuate the manifestations of race and its pervasiveness in upholding a racialized dichotomy. Thus, I see on one hand those who are stained by the essentialist notions of skin color being continually denigrated, while on the other hand I see those of a certain mixedness and phenotypic features being complicitous in colorism. On one side, there is the common problem of (not) belonging due to how we learn to see race and sort people accordingly. On the other side, there is the less studied problem of how mixed-race people internalize the value of whiteness and perpetuate the very system that creates their alienation in the first place.

Recognizing and Confronting Racial Realities

This research sought to determine how multiracial students conform to and/or resist racial privilege and to what extent their experiences within political institutions influence their racial identity choice. Critical Race Theory helped me to unveil the theoretical, conceptual, and pedagogical experiences related to mixed-race experiences at Cliff View College. In multiple respects, using a qualitative inquiry approach seen through the lens of Critical Race Theory to analyze the discourse and lived experiences of mixed-race participants challenged how a tribal college operated in troubling ways by oppressing, marginalizing, and denigrating mixed-race with black students but not mixed-race with white students, who benefited from their whiteness and found ways to navigate the institution. Through the use of discourse as a component of CRT analysis, I have practiced Ladson-Billings’s (1999) perspective: “The voice of people of color is required for a deep understanding of the educational system” (16). And as the discourse is structured around the lived experience of those of a certain mixedness, then that structure provides a framework prearranged by the meaning of race.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) further assert that, “A critical race theory challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (26). And this study’s methodology challenged the traditional paradigms and theories that often portray all mixed-race people as victims, while exposing the historical context of race and the multiple layers of oppression and discrimination within a tribal college that places emphasis on cultural
and traditional art forms as a means of self-determination. As Soloranzo and Yosso explain, “If methodologies have been used to silence and marginalize people of color, then methodologies can also give voice and turn the margins into places of transformative resistance” (37). For many reasons, Critical Race Theory was used as a tool to explain the sustained inequalities of a racial hierarchy and the connections to mixed-race identity choice.

The definition and supportive arguments of CRT scholars (Allen 2006; Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delagado and Stefancic 2001; Foster 2005; Leonardo 2005; Soloranzo and Yosso 2002) provide a lens of insight to identify and analyze how the cultural structure of political institutions maintains a racialized social order. Although race and racism are the focal points of a critical race analysis, such investigation also divulges the layers of multiraciality and how certain mixedness can then be viewed as a symbolic form of material value—that is, that lighter carries more value than darker. As explained by Lewis (2003), “Race, and specifically within our current context, whiteness, can then be considered as a form of symbolic capital—a resource that may be accessed or deployed to provide access to additional resources” (171). And as a result of the culture of political institutions having influencing factors in both informal and formal lived experiences, there are multiple forms of white privilege and power at play.

The findings at Cliff View College, simply stated, were that the experiences of mixed-race with black versus mixed-race with white students did not support the political stances commonly associated with academic discourses on multiraciality (victimization, fluid racial identity, eliminating race, etc.). Although most participants reported at least some feelings of alienation from the American Indian community, it is also true that their views about being mixed-race people varied depending on where they were racially positioned. These differences were also related to varying awareness about the experiences of mixed-race people and the operation of race more generally. This suggests that rather than challenging race as we know it, mixed-race people are in fact racialized and positioned; they are not, in actuality, without a race because, more important, they have a racial position in the racial status order of Cliff View and the larger society.

In this study, the educational institution played a role in the racialization of mixed-race students. Cliff View, as a tribal college with a strong history of focusing on self-determination, did not institutionally act in ways that are
compatible with the meaning of self-determination, nor did it appear to critique its institutional day-to-day practices of oppression. Despite its own history of being oppressed as an institution that serves American Indian people, it eroded the credibility of its supposed political stance against the historically racist attitudes of “educating the Indian” as well as more hidden aspects of inequality. After all, European colonization and the construction of race are two sides of the same coin. One cannot claim to be decolonized until racial practices have been ended. It is clear that Cliff View has a long way to go to decolonize its racial practices. By continually upholding white supremacist notions to devise opportunities to instill internalized racism, Cliff View College is institutionally assimilating the meaning of whiteness and bestowing more privilege on those who serve the larger political interests of whites (Allen 2004; Bell 1995; Tatum 1997). Self-determination and the elimination of racism, including colorism and featurism, must be co-extensive. Submission to the value of lighter skin is in no way a form of self-determination.

The findings of this study revealed that lived experiences, in particular experiences at Cliff View College, were influenced by certain mixedness. Mixed race with black and mixed race with white were the basic perspectives for the emergence of three major themes: (1) racial(ized) self-perceptions, (2) peer interaction and influences, and (3) impact on academic experiences. The nine mixed-raced participants’ perceptions of the material value of race in their formal and informal schooling experiences contributed to the context of the discourse they used to describe their mixedness, and even influenced their own mixed-race identity choices. Connolly and Troyna (1998) explains how race operates as a material value within institutions:

It is clearly the case that white skin, for instance, can represent symbolic capital in certain contexts. Some teachers may be influenced (whether directly or indirectly) by a set of racist beliefs which encourages them to think of white children as being more intelligent and well behaved than black children. In this sense, having white skin represents a form of symbolic capital which brings with it better treatment and more educational opportunities. (21)

Further, Lewis (2003) argue that “race can be thought of as a symbolic or signifying system that serves as an instrument of communication and knowledge (tells us things about people before we even know them) and as an instrument of domination that sorts and ranks groups” (171). Race as a
symbolic factor could be seen in participants’ perceptions. Those who were mixed race with white and phenotypically light complexioned viewed their lived experiences as “a great opportunity,” “an advantage.” These students said things like: “Because I look white, I’m often judged different from the rest of my friends who look Native or Hispanic”; “People just see me as white . . . I’m not always treated different”; “In class, they just assume that I’m smarter because of the way I look”; and “I look white . . . so . . . it’s just different for me.”

Ladson-Billings (1999) eloquently explained the importance of “voices” to understand the racist inequalities of education structured within institutions. A different lens comes out of the experiences of those who are black/American Indian mixed-race people. The “voices” of these participants affirm that their identity options are anything but fluid advantages. These affirmations are captured in statements like the following: “Phenotypically it is like, obviously, they say she’s just a black girl. Here at this school [Cliff View College] . . . I wonder if it would have been seen easier for me to say, ‘I’m black’”; “You can’t be Native . . . you are part black”; and “I find that a lot of people here [Cliff View College] carry a lot of racial and prejudice baggage. All I can say is that there is a major difference between having white blood in you.” The “voices” of those who are mixed race with black and phenotypically darker complexioned allude to hidden racial agendas that demarcate racial boundaries and influence the meanings of mixed-race identities. Identity is not simply a choice for those who are alienated and denigrated. Others who aspire to attain whiteness assign it to them and draw distinctions.

Although the majority of educators at Cliff View College identify as American Indian, it is also true that they are mostly people who are mixed race with white. Their perceptions of race provided the context and setting that reinforced stereotypes and racialized experiences, thus influencing the mixed-race identity choices of students. Other mixed-race with black students had similar stories: “I’m viewed as black even though I identify with my Native American heritage more often”; and “But it seems like . . . especially here at school [Cliff View College] . . . it’s like . . . oh . . . well . . . you are pretending or you couldn’t possibly be.” The phrases “more Native,” “viewed as black,” and “you couldn’t possibly be” indicate that at Cliff View College there are no racial options for mixed-race with black students other than “black.” In this way, identity choice is institutionally and socially structured.
Findings further indicated that those who identified as mixed race with white who witnessed acts of alienation or denigration by educators and peers remained silent and did not challenge such behavior, thus performing race through their multiraciality. For example, a mixed-race with white participant stated: “Living in Farmington, New Mexico . . . it was just different for me than other Natives. No one was really mean to me because they peg me as white or look at me as white. Other Natives had problems but not me . . . so . . . it’s kind of an advantage.”

And while mixed race with white has been understood by participants to have a specific, symbolic material value, a similar example of acknowledging racial inequalities by performing race and remaining silent, not challenging racist behavior, was revealed in the following statement: “A lot of people just think I’m white, but they sure don’t think I’m Mexican [laughs] and definitely not Native. My friends sometime catch a lot of crap from other people because they are dark. That never happens to me. I wouldn’t want to have to deal with that . . . I never have to deal with that.”

De-racing Schools as Race Makes Spaces

Institutional racism and white privilege have become embedded in the deeper, subtle layers in the meaning behind identity choices of multiracial students. Therefore, when trying to understand the persistence of racism and whiteness as forms of high symbolic and material value, it is not enough just to examine the realm of individual choice and the influences of a marginalized institution, such as Cliff View College. One must look at the structural context that manifests symbolic material value into reproducing racism from a macro lens (Omi and Winant 1994). In this study, the larger structures of racism manifested through the discourse around defining one’s Indianness. There is a contradiction in that on one hand whiteness exoticizes Indianness, but on the other hand, as seen from a “macro” perspective, whites need allies, including even those who become defined as “Native,” to maintain power. As one mixed-race participant explained, “More and more tribes are going white; it’s the popular trend.” This statement is an example of the influences of a racialized social system within the United States. This assimilation of white privilege is often invisible and unacknowledged by tribes. Tribes participating as the oppressors are clouded, and they show little willingness to
be empathetic toward the symbolic, material value of the layers of brownness and, in particular, blackness in their midst. Instead, these acts of internalized racist ideology fragment and divide raced groups while also creating rank-ordered, caste-like structures. Those with a specific mixedness have a group inroad to Indianness, unlike others, which only serves the larger political interests of whites in that it reifies the condition where whiter and more European-looking and European-sounding bodies are assigned higher value (Allen 2004; Bell 1995; Tatum 1997).

The situation becomes further compounded when multiraciality is viewed as the answer to debunking race. From a macro lens, a mixed-race reality is neither fluid nor does it simply by existing improve race relations. At Cliff View College, the perspective of mixed-race participants most often upheld the notion of “laissez-faire racism” (Bobo and Smith 1998). When comparing mixed-race with black participants to the meaning of Indianness through a white lens of influence, Bobo and Smith pinpoint that “laissez-faire racism is based on cultural inferiority” (186). And with cultural superiority having an economic and political value, the opposite, cultural inferiority, is then based on “a historical analysis of the changing economics and politics of race in the United States” (187). Race has been defined and positioned as an economic and political tool within a racial hierarchy. And a mixed-race with white person enrolled as a member in a state or federally recognized tribe has both an economic and political value that influences the definition of one’s Indianness. The concept of laissez-faire racism is applied not only to people who are raced as monoracially black, but also people who are mixed race with black with specific phenotypic features. This provides a more adequate lens for viewing the influencing factors of a certain mixedness conforming to a racialized social system and why one’s Indianness as mixed race with black is culturally inferior to mixed race with white.

I hoped to develop a deeper understanding about the mixed-race experience within a tribal college setting. I wanted to help articulate and understand the lived experiences of mixed-race students within a white supremacist context. More specifically, I sought to contextualize students’ representation of their racial identity choices through the compounded race politics of blood quantum and stereotypes of phenotypic features. The purpose of such inquiry was to shed light on the misconceptions of being mixed race (fluid identity, eliminating race, resisting a racialized social system, etc.) and, in turn, on
how Indianness has been interpreted as a major factor in determining membership within these types of peer groups. My intent was to provide insight to describe and explain more fully the formal and informal lived experiences of mixed-raced with black and mixed-race with white American Indian students. This explanation, that colorism plays a majoring role in shaping students’ feelings of belonging, could in turn assist educational organizations in evaluating their own institutional and educational practices in regard to race.

As I gathered data and analyzed its contents in an ongoing manner consistent with ground theory methodology, I realized that overall the mixed-race students’ experiences were heavily influenced by an institution that aligns with societal norms, regardless of its status as a tribal college. I found that there were different experiences unique to mixed-race with white and mixed-race with black students. While both category of students experienced the effect of feeling on the other side of American Indian boundary demarcations, the experience of mixed-race with blacks students was much more denigrating and exclusionary. In fact, there were many ways in which mixed-race with white students were privileged relative to other students, including those students who were not seen as mixed race. Not only were the specific needs of students not articulated, they also went unrecognized by the institution. Although participants, especially mixed-race with white students, described numerous ways they conformed to the practice of racial hierarchy and colorism at Cliff View, there were occasions when resistance was mentioned. However, these forms of resistance seemed to do little to prevent their being assigned a racial status in ways consistent with the larger racial structure of the United States.

The theory resulting from this study identifies family, peers, and institutions as major influencing factors in defining a mixed-race student’s experience at a tribal college. The family has a strong role in influencing the symbolic, material value of race and a student’s interactions with racial issues, even at the collegiate level. Race impacts much of the student experience in a university environment, from introduction to the campus to roommates to peers. Currently there is very little research that examines how race is asserted, assigned, and negotiated as a mixed-race experience at a tribal college. This study illustrates that there is indeed a direct racialized impact, and that this impact also has implications for the definition and practice of “cultural heritage” and “Nativeness.”
Peer interactions also influenced the mixed-race student’s experience at Cliff View College. Acceptance or rejection by peers contributes to students’ sense of racial identity and often magnifies the psychological effect of their mixed-race background. Students are reminded, both subtly and overtly, in and outside of the classroom, that they do not fit neatly and completely into a monoracial American Indian category. The impact is even stronger for some students who, because of their black phenotypic appearance, are not acknowledged as American Indian within the campus and community culture of Cliff View College. Examining peer interactions outside of the classroom is not a new phenomenon of research on students’ experiences within a college environment. However, the mixed-race student experience, in particular the experience of mixed-race American Indian students in a tribal college setting, differs slightly from what current research offers, especially since it has been conducted at mostly majority white schools. By focusing on a tribal college whose students are mostly students of color, we can see how the privileging of whiteness functions hegemonically among people of color, even in a space that is allegedly “theirs.” Within the highly racialized confines of Cliff View College, these students’ experiences are continually influencing their notions of who they are, and the social actors in the institution draw lines defining who they are not.

Overall, I believe that my research findings broaden and deepen the understanding of the tribal college experience and its impact on mixed-race American Indian identity choice experience. The findings demonstrate further the reinforcement of race as a social construct, in particular the role phenotypic appearance plays in one’s connection to a tribal college community. Moreover, each student’s experience in this study was shown to impact identity disposition in more powerful ways. It’s this disposition regarding identity choice politics that re-fabricates races as a material value.