

## BELONGING: RACE OR CATEGORIES

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As a biracial child growing up in Virginia in the late 20th and early 21st century, I was never sure where I belonged on a racial spectrum. I was born to a white woman from California and a black man from Louisiana, who raised my siblings and me with a sense of familial belonging; however, while always knowing that I belonged to a biracial family, outside of the family home, I did not have a sense of belonging to any racial community. This essay is an overview about my feelings of my experiences; of how I view belonging and racial communities in light of my experiences; and of how race is classified in relation to the United States Census and the implications of those classifications.

### BELONGING

We are programmed to think that racial communities will shape our relationships, and to some extent that might be true. But I would propose that racial communities only shape our relationships in so far as these communities often are founded on shared experiences through which individuals find belonging.

When I say that I did not have a sense of belonging with any racial community outside my immediate family I am not saying that my parents did not try to give us a sense of an outside community. I remember attending community meetings for young African-American girls and going to Sunday school classes even though my parents were not active churchgoers when I was young. But the common elements that brought the members of these groups together did not apply to me: I had not been raised in all African-American communities like the girls in my heritage meetings (having grown up in a predominately white neighborhood and attending predominately white schools) and I myself was not religious. Belonging was not something that came easily to me.

“Passing” was not an option. For one, it would not have been an acceptable path in my family; my parents always stressed the importance of knowing and accepting our full family history. Secondly, I presented to the world as a light-skinned African-American. Even when I was trying to be involved in the African-American community

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at my prestigious, mostly white high school, my African-American peers called me “Oreo” (slang for white on the inside, black on the outside). Most of my African-American peers seemed to derive their sense of belonging from the racial group that they knew they belonged to, and they were quick to point out my failings as a black person, perhaps in attempt to solidify their understanding of their own identities. On the other hand, my white peers did not seem as focused on the idea of belonging to a certain racial community and were less likely to ostracize me for not fitting in to a specific racial role. Because of this, my only sense of racial belonging came in interactions with my siblings, who faced similar experiences to my own.

Growing up, I often felt that I was putting on a façade whenever I left the house for social events. This could explain why I was kind of an unsocial child. I often felt that to be accepted among my peers who formed relationships based on race that I had to act a certain way; to be what they were expecting racially even if it was not what I really was. I was afraid that people would discover that I was some sort of imposter that really did not belong in the social group to which I physically should belong. All through high school, I worried how I would fit into the racial categories that my classmates seemed to group themselves into because I did not technically fit into these perfect racial identity groups. It was not until college, when I started practicing occasionally with a recreational sports team that I began to understand that a sense of belonging had little to do with my skin color and more about a sense of connecting with other people.

For me, it is the shared experiences that create the connections that are at the heart of belonging. It maybe happens less often for me than it does with others (or maybe that it just does not seem to happen for me in groups defined by race), but it does happen. It can be as simple as talking to a peer about classes, lamenting over the workload, and recognizing that we are going through the same thing. It can be as intense as growing up with people who look similar to you and have faced the same biases growing up because of your shared appearances. This connection is belonging, and the more it happens, the more a person feels like he or she belongs. Belonging is about shared experiences, and for African-Americans this is understandably a strong bond since they often face experiences based on the prejudices of others.

The team that I practiced occasionally with in college was a wonderful mix of different identities, from racial minorities, to trans individuals, to queer individuals—all having grown up with different phenotypes and ancestries, but having found shared experiences of “otherness” that bound them together. This “otherness” was not nec-

essarily simply about being different, which by itself is noted in communities and often accepted. “Otherness” is manifest as a difference that is shunned and pushed out of the collective group. As someone who had felt ostracized growing up, I tried to empathize with their experiences. I never truly belonged to this amazing group of individuals because I only discovered them toward the end of my time at college, but they gave me the first true glimpse that belonging is really about the shared experiences.

Despite not understanding this sense of belonging until college, looking back on my diverse group of friends, I know that relationships, the manifestations of belonging, are grown in these simple and complicated shared experiences. My lifelong friendships are ones that grow out of shared experiences, and when the shared experiences no longer hold meaning, or fade, or are replaced by newer experiences, relationships fade.

That being said, not all multi-racial children have the same experience. Some children tend to identify more with one racial identity than another, while others tend to revel in the multi-culturalism that they represent. However, as racial identities and classifications evolve and change, there arises a conversation in our society about whether we should be “getting over race” or whether we should still be acknowledging race in order to address underlying social discrepancies.

## RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS

Race is a method of grouping of humans based on observable phenotypes (such as skin color) and ancestry. While this classification has a far-reaching history, it also has a history specific to the United States. Race has changed from the 1660s, when colonies in Virginia first adopted a “*partus sequitur ventrem*” rule, which dictated that children born were considered as being the same racial status as that of their mothers.

There has recently been a renewed academic discourse about the importance of racial classifications. These discussions are crucial now, especially with the rise of white identity politics. Many white Americans are finding a renewed importance in their shared identity and are beginning to parade their whiteness as an excuse for policy concerns and actions.

What these white Americans are failing to note, is that this shared identity is based on nothing more than skin of the same color. It is not necessarily based on shared ancestry, shared issues, or shared experience. Being proud of an Irish-American ancestry, and the experiences that are entailed as part of the Irish-American history

in America, is different than finding comfort in being a white American in a predominately white county.

In this way, race for African-Americans is different than race is for white Americans. While for many white Americans, cultural identity is rooted in their family's immigration to the United States, this is not the case for many African-Americans. Many African-Americans cannot trace their ancestry back as far as white Americans. Shared experiences of African-Americans are rooted in the shared history of slavery and incubated in Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement. For example, my family on my father's side cannot be traced back to our countries of origin in Africa, but on my mother's side our family is Swedish, English, and Irish. For my ancestry, it is most accurate to describe my father's family as black, but lacking to describe my mother's family as white. Furthermore, racial classifications have historically been used to designate outside people as "others," with "white" often being the default classification.

#### RACE IN THE CENSUS

Some members of the American Psychological Association have suggested an ecological approach to defining human classifications:

With an ecological lens, psychologists can understand in more depth the multiple, embedded contexts in which all individuals exist and the reciprocal and dynamic interactions between individuals and these other systems. This model examines individual characteristics while also considering the macrosystem (global influences), exosystem (social and governmental institutions) and microsystem (family, community and peers), which interact as an open system<sup>[1]</sup> . . . These interactions affect and influence all aspects of the person and daily life.<sup>2</sup>

Identities are formed through experiences. In turn, the environments that we occupy shape those experiences that we do and do not have. Race cannot define our identities because it cannot fully encompass our experiences.

In this vein, the American Anthropological Association has also recommended the elimination of race on the United States Census going forward. In 2013, the Census Bureau declared "that race and ethnicity are not quantifiable values. Rather, identity is a complex mix of one's family and social environment, historical or socio-political constructs, personal experience, context, and many other immeasura-

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1. URIE BRONFENBRENNER, *THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* (1979).

2. Vincenzo Teran & Kimberly Santora, *Beyond Race and Ethnicity: Examining Development in Context*, AM. PSYCHOL. ASS'N (Aug. 2013), <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2013/08/multiculturalism-perspectives.aspx>.

ble factors.”<sup>3</sup> The United States Bureau of the Census decided that race was a socio-political construct and not scientific or anthropological in nature.<sup>4</sup>

Racial classification has always been a topic for debate; however, there are two ways in which the discussion about the Census has varied from discussions in the past: 1) there is a new focus on self-identification versus assigned identity and 2) the shift away from “race” and “origins” on the Census to “categories.”

It was not until the 1960 Census that Census takers were first allowed to pick their own racial identities.<sup>5</sup> While this may not seem like a huge step forward, for someone who has never really identified with other people’s perception of me, being able to self-identify allows some significant corrections of others’ perceptions.

Less than ten years later, *Loving v. Virginia*<sup>6</sup> became important not only because it allowed for interracial marriages (and disallowed racial classifications to be used in statutes absent strict scrutiny), but also because it gave birth to a new generation of multiracial children. In 1997, thirty years after the *Loving v. Virginia* decision, the Office of Management and Budget (“OMB”), the office of the government in charge of Census administration, took the next step after self-identification due to the increasing number of interracial children; the office allowed Census takers to indicate one or more races on the 2000 Census.

For the 2020 Census, the OMB is considering a new way of asking questions about identity, but focusing on self-identified “categories” rather than on “race” or “origin.” While these categories are still under development, it seems as if the categories would include voluntary options of race and origin, which would not have to be selected if they did not coincide with the Census taker’s personal identity. Because of this proposed set-up, Census takers would not be required to indicate any racial affiliation if they did not identify with any. While it is seemingly insignificant, this shift displays the increasing number of diverse members in the American public and acknowledges the differences of ethnic groups and self-identification within technical racial

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3. Memoranda from United States Dep’t of Commerce on Econ. and Stat. Admin. 2010 Census Race and Hispanic Origin Alternative Questionnaire Experiment (Feb. 28, 2013), [https://www.census.gov/2010census/pdf/2010\\_Census\\_Race\\_HO\\_AQE.pdf](https://www.census.gov/2010census/pdf/2010_Census_Race_HO_AQE.pdf).

4. MARY MAGUIRE & DAN OKADA, CRITICAL ISSUES IN CRIME AND JUSTICE: THOUGHT, POLICY, AND PRACTICE (2d ed. 2015).

5. D’vera Cohn, *Census Considers New Approach to Asking About Race—By Not Using the Term at All*, PEW RES. CTR. (June 18, 2015), <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/18/census-considers-new-approach-to-asking-about-race-by-not-using-the-term-at-all/>.

6. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

classifications.<sup>7</sup> It also opens up the Census format for a more malleable self-identification process which allows people to be grouped with people of similar experiences instead of solely on skin color.

This shift from depending solely on a person's racial composition to allowing an individual to group his or herself by several different types of categories shows a growing deference to shared experiences over shared DNA. As author Kati Marton describes in a recent opinion piece for the *Washington Post*, identity is best defined by our experiences and events in our individual lives rather than the genetic makeup we were born with.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that experiences and racial makeup are unrelated. In fact, as a person who presents as African-American, I am reminded daily that the experiences I have are tainted by my own genetic makeup. However, many of my experiences are not related to my race and have more to do with other factors of my upbringing, such as socio-economic status, gender, and education.

A categories test on the Census could not possibly group me with all the people who have had the same experiences as I have; I am certain there is no other person. But this test, rather than a test based on race, allows for the possibility, especially with those who are multi-racial, to be grouped with those who come from similar life experience—people who have more similar stories—rather than with people who are the same race.

No two people are the same, but up until this point the Census has grouped together huge swaths of people only by genetic makeup. When we share experiences with other people, in conversation, in relationships, through social media, and in books, we are connecting to those primal things that are the building blocks to communities: those feelings of belonging. While grouping people by category only begins to cover the wide and beautiful diversity of human beings that we are, it does delve deeper into shared experiences rather than shared skin color.

## CONCLUSION

To me this is what makes the story of *Loving v. Virginia*<sup>9</sup> such a beautiful story. While the case is a decision that is often touted in the legal community, the real takeaway is the simple story of a couple. I

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7. MARY MAGUIRE & DAN OKADA, *CRITICAL ISSUES IN CRIME AND JUSTICE: THOUGHT, POLICY, AND PRACTICE* (2d ed. 2015).

8. Kati Marton, *A DNA Test Upended Everything I Knew About My Identity. Now Who Am I?*, *THE WASH. POST* (Mar. 17 2017), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-dna-test-upended-everything-i-knew-about-my-identity-now-who-am-i/2017/03/17/89e046dc-0a6b-11e7-a15f-a58d4a988474\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.44502e9a4ba5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-dna-test-upended-everything-i-knew-about-my-identity-now-who-am-i/2017/03/17/89e046dc-0a6b-11e7-a15f-a58d4a988474_story.html?utm_term=.44502e9a4ba5).

9. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

always knew about the Lovings' case—being from a biracial family knowledge of *Loving v. Virginia* is probably required. But in high school I did a paper on anti-miscegenation laws and really learned about the Lovings themselves for the first time. What struck me was not their fight in the courts, but rather their love story: two people growing up in the same community, who therefore had similar experiences and shared connections, who found belonging in each other. A belonging that, even though these were not people who wanted to fight on a national stage, was worth fighting for. For them, it was not about race, it was all about belonging.

When asked about my identity, I usually answer with the easy classification of biracial. But when I truly stop to think about who I am, I think about where my roots are planted and the places where I seek food when hungry: my Creole grandmother who taught me how to cook crawfish etouffee or my DAR grandmother who taught me the proper way to roll out dough for apple pie. I think of my grandfather, the descendent of Swedish immigrants who spent his childhood on an Iowa farm, and my grandfather, who worked in a black barbershop in New Orleans. In other words, I think of the experiences that my family and I have had, not the colors of our skin. There are so many of my and my ancestors' experiences that it is impossible to sum up our lives by a simple classification based on phenotypes and ancestry. Biracial is not what I am, it is just the current, and wholly inadequate, classification of my diverse experiences.

These discussions of the evolution of the Census give me hope. Every time I see a multiracial family with a multiracial child, I feel a bit more expectancy. As I have found my way to belonging, I understand that the racial labels (whether they fall under "race" or "origins") are becoming a less applicable way of identification for more individuals. While for the foreseeable future multiracial children are likely to continue to be grouped into this catch-all-category of "One or More Races," I know that as our numbers continue to grow, at some point this classification will no longer be sufficient for gathering and analyzing information. The debate about the Census shows that an evolution is already occurring.

