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# "What Are You?": Racial Ambiguity, Stigma, and the Racial Formation Project

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Using interview data from individuals who were frequently asked some version of the question "What are you?" in regards to their race, we apply a deviance perspective to frame these encounters as micro level racial formation projects. Racial formation projects are problematized when one's race is not readily classifiable. These data suggest that when race is perceptibly ambiguous, stigma is assigned and normativity is enforced through discursive constraint and other means. Racially ambiguous individuals use many forms of resistance to navigate these encounters and make identity claims that either affirm or endanger the normative racial formation order.

## DOING RACE IN *DEVIANT BEHAVIOR*

*Deviant Behavior*—an academic journal marked by its interdisciplinary dedication to the study of marginalized collectives and processes—has long been an avenue through which normative social orders, traditionalist epistemologies, and conservative academic discourses were questioned and problematized. Although social groups as disparate as table dancers and white supremacists have received analytic attention within the journal's pages, the same cannot be said for a group that, despite being stigmatized (Cooney and Radina 2000; Gordon 1964; Henriques 1974; Jones 2010; Lyman 1990; Spickard 1989), is more prevalent in contemporary American society—those who identify as multiracial.

Upon conducting a thematic content analysis of all abstracts and article titles for *Deviant Behavior* ranging from 1979 (the journal's inaugural year) to 2014, the authors determined that the journal has not published any research on the status of being biracial, mixed race, or multiracial, within this 35-year span. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that for each article

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title/abstract that mentioned race or ethnicity (general or specific) in some capacity ($n = 53$), the concepts were rarely mentioned as the primary subjects of inquiry. What has been published can be categorized as falling within two distinct categories: those that considered perceptions of issues by people of various races and ethnicities (e.g., Blackburn et al. 2011; Lee and DeHart 2007) and those that studied the effect of race and/or ethnicity on the probability or likelihood of deviant action, classification, or victimization (e.g., Hinduja and Higgins 2011; Reyns et al. 2012; Sischo et al. 2006). While race was not absent from the journal, it was largely construed as a categorical variable: race and ethnicity were conceptual categories used to map out the intricacies and processes of other social phenomena. These "variables" then, were reified without being conceived of as problematic social phenomena in their own right.

This particular orientation toward race had other consequences—race theory was absent from the pages of the journal over this time period. Also absent were works that examined how race could be thought of as an accomplishment, a performance, a contest over identity claims, and a deviance process enacted through social interaction. We do not assume that the editors of *Deviant Behavior* have, over the years, rejected articles that examined race in this manner. Instead, we assume that scholars of race may not consider *Deviant Behavior* to be an appropriate outlet for their work. It may further be the case that they did not believe that theories of deviance such as Goffman's work on stigma (1963) were useful when considering their subject matter. With this article, the authors seek to address these unintended deficits by making the social processes around race and stigma, via the life histories of those who are frequently asked about their racial classification, the center of analysis.

## RACIAL AMBIGUITY, STIGMA, AND THE RACIAL FORMATION PROJECT

> In the third grade, when I was nine years old, I attended our elementary school's honors awards night. I was excited and thrilled to attend. I had won several awards: "Best in Math Award," "Best in Spelling Award," "Best in Reading Award," and "Highest Grade Point Average." I wore my favorite pink dress and pink hair ribbons that night. My friend, Susie, wanted to introduce me to her mother. Almost before Susie got my name out her mother turned to me and asked me without hesitation, "What are you?" She did not ask about my accomplishments. I thought she was quite rude and as my parents taught me "ignorant." Yet, she did hurt my feelings. She asked me, "What are you?" even though I was only nine-years-old. (Tiffanie Grier)

The first author of this article self identifies as a black–white, biracial woman who has lived with the personal and social consequences of not being easy to racially classify based on her physical appearance—she is racially ambiguous. All her life she has been subjected to questions from strangers and acquaintances such as: "What's your ethnicity?" "Are you black?" "Are you white?" "Are you from Puerto Rico?" "Are you from Greece?" "Are you from Mexico?" "What are you mixed with?" or most commonly "What are you?"

Omi and Winant have written about the social importance of these types of encounters:

> One of the first things we notice about people when we meet them (along with their sex) is their race. We utilize race to provide clues about *who* a person is. This fact is made painfully obvious when we encounter someone whom we cannot conveniently racially categorize—someone who is, for example, racially "mixed" or of an ethnic/racial group we are not familiar with. Such an encounter becomes a source of discomfort and momentarily a crisis in racial meaning. (Omi and Winant 1994:59)

The "What are you?" question is the subject of this article. The encounter is framed as a micro level racial formation project that contributes to sustaining the macro level racial structure (Omi and Winant 1994). Racial formation is defined as a "process of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (Omi and Winant 1994:56). It is argued here that when a person's race cannot be "seen" or "read" then commonsense understandings about race cannot be ascribed to the individual. As a result, the racially ambiguous individual is stigmatized as "deviant" or "problematic" until the ambiguity is resolved. Even after the ambiguity is cleared up, the stigma may remain or become intensified. The stigma can shift from being one who is racially unclassifiable to one who carries a "tribal stigma" from being associated with a particular race (Goffman 1963) or one who does not physically conform to the racial formation order.

Viewed from the perspective of racial formation theory, the "What are you?" question can be understood as an attempt to repair the interruption or breach in the micro level racial formation project. In a complementary fashion, the responses to these questions can be viewed as reaffirmations of those racial projects or as resistance to them and stigma (Rambo-Ronai and Cross 1998). Both the asking of the question and the answering of the question constitute a process of either reproducing or deconstructing race at the level of identity and at the level of social structure.

Maria Root (1996:8) states, "The physical ambiguity of many multiracial people, as well as mistaken identifications about their heritage, clearly challenges the notion of 'pure race.'" Yet according to the literature and our study participants, the questions still persist, as if there is a "real" race to be found. While there is a great deal of research on multiracial or mixed raced individuals, there is little that foregrounds the "What are you?" encounter specifically. Furthermore, as we discuss later, it appears researchers are only too comfortable with imposing their own racial formation projects on their research subjects or outright stigmatizing them.

In this article, we will explore aspects of the "What are you?" interaction from the perspective of racially ambiguous people. We specify "racial ambiguity" in part, because almost half the participants in this study did not self-identify as multiracial. When their race is called into question, we might call them "falsely accused" (Becker 1963) from their perspective, if we accepted race as real. Whether they self-identify as multiracial or not, their existence problematizes the racial formation order. This, in turn, inspires the "What are you?" question. From the experience of interviewing eleven respondents who self-identified as being racially ambiguous, we found that they were not always passive victims of stigma; they were often active agents who interrupted or resisted the racial formation projects being imposed upon them.

## INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL RACIAL FORMATION PROJECTS

### Macro Racial Formation Projects: "What are you?" on Questionnaires and Surveys

The "What are you?" question occurs on forms and surveys when respondents are asked to check their race. When the question is asked and answered, a micro level racial project has been enacted, thus reifying the macro level social structure. The asker assumes race is "real" and presents categories. When the respondent makes a choice, she or he simultaneously internalizes the categories,

legitimates the act of asking the question, and legitimates the categories being presented. The loop is complete; the racial formation project has come off without a hitch.

Many researchers have invested effort in predicting the answers to the "What are you?" question. For instance, Khanna (2004) found that multiracial respondents were five times more likely to identify as Asian than as white if they felt others thought they looked Asian. Telles (2002) found that in Brazil, the darker the respondent's skin tone, the more likely raters were to classify them as an identity that was different than what the respondent had claimed for themselves. Kana'iaupuni and Liebler (2005) found that on the 1990 U.S. Census, Hawaiians who had a closer link to Hawaii as a locale, meaning they were born in Hawaii or were return-migrants to Hawaii, were more likely than other multiracial Hawaiians to identify as Hawaiian rather than another race. Hitlin and colleagues (2006) were concerned with how adolescents racially self-identified over time. Herman (2011) examined the factors that affected the self-identification of multiracial people and how their self-identification changed over time. Khanna (2012) investigated the factors that shaped racial identity formation and the implications for race data collection. Waters' (1990) research dealt with how and why people with multiple white-ethnic backgrounds selected one of their ethnicities over the others.

Research ventures such as these objectify and reify the legitimacy of asking the "What are you?" question, and serve to accommodate racial formation projects at both the micro and macro level. When we take into consideration that governmental agencies ask the question and researchers invest resources trying to predict the answer to the question, we can start to see the contours of the racial formation project as it is being produced and reproduced at the institutional level. The inability to clearly answer the "What are you?" question is perceived as somehow problematic.

## Micro Racial Formation Projects: Multiracial as a Problematic Identity

In *The Souls of Black Folk,* W.E.B. Du Bois poses the question "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1903:8) when pondering the status of African Americans as subjects of social science research. Similarly, much of the research on multiracial identity assumes the people being studied are a "problem." In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the image of the tragic mullato pervaded both popular and academic discourse (Jones 2010; Lyman 1990). There was a widespread stereotype present throughout the United States that multiracial people tended to be more "confused" than their single race counterparts (Gordon 1964; Henriques 1974; Spickard 1989). As recently as 2000, Cooney and Radina posited that multiracial boys and girls exhibited higher "problem rates" than boys and girls classified as a single race.

Other research has asserted the opposite. Cauce et al. (1992) interviewed and administered a series of standardized questionnaires to twenty-two biracial and twenty-two monoracial adolescents. They found no significant differences in social adjustment in terms of life stress, behavior problems, psychological distress, competence, or self-worth and concluded that ". . . biracial early adolescents appear to be remarkably similar to other children of color matched on basic demographic variables" (Cauce et al. 1992:220). While researchers try to determine if identifying with more than one race is problematic or not for individuals, few make asking the question "What are you?" the subject of inquiry, few make asking the question "the problem." Instead, they problematize the identity as if it is intrinsically deviant.

## DISCURSIVE CONSTRAINT AND RESISTANCE TO STIGMA AS A RACIAL FORMATION PROJECT

In this section we discuss Omi and Winant's (1994) racial formation theory, Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma, and the concept of *discursive constraint* and *resistance* (Rambo-Ronai and Cross 1998). These materials frame our discussion of the eleven life history interviews we conducted with our study participants. By synthesizing these ideas, we hope to elaborate on how racial formation projects function at the level of identity, as well as at the level of micro social interactions and macro social institutions.

Race represents a powerful normative system that serves as a reference point to both evaluate and control behavior. For Omi and Winant, race is both a social formation and discursive practice:

> The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories are themselves formed, transformed, destroyed, and reformed. We use the term *racial formation* to refer to the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the contents and importance of racial categories and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. (Omi and Winant 1994:61)

For Omi and Winant, a racial project is, ". . . simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (1994:56). Racial projects, "connect what race *means* in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized,* based upon that meaning" (1994:56). At the micro level, the authors argue that "race is a matter of individuality, of the formation of identity. The ways in which we understand ourselves and interact with others, the structuring of our practical activity . . . these are all shaped by racial meanings and racial awareness" (1994:66–67).

The physical characteristics, behaviors, and reputations of individuals are judged in society every day. Some attributes are viewed as acceptable and in line with societal norms while other attributes are seen as abnormal and a deviation from normalcy. Erving Goffman (1963) described three types of stigma: (1) abominations of the body (physical deformities), (2) blemishes of individual character (dishonesty, addiction, etc.), and (3) tribal stigma (race, nation, religion, etc.). Goffman stressed that: "By definition, of course, we believe the person with the stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkably, reduce their life chances" (1963:5).

When a person's physical characteristics fail to conform to racial stereotypes there is a potential disruption in the racial formation project and as a result, a potential for stigma. The person is no longer a "whole and usual person, but a tainted and discounted one" (Goffman 1963:3). Ambiguous racial attributes are not in line with societal norms and become problematic because race cannot serve as a reference point for reorganizing and redistributing resources along particular racial lines. Put in more simple terms, people may not know how to think about and act towards one who is racially ambiguous. Racial ambiguity is not a tribal stigma so much as a failure to be whole and usual by clearly belonging to a single tribe. An ambiguously raced individual can become the target of discriminatory behaviors and discourses that, when viewed through the lens of racial formation theory, can be seen as desperate, reactive attempts to restore the normative racial formation order. The "What are you?" question, viewed from this perspective, is an attempt to dispel the ambiguity and assign the individual to a tribe.

Rambo-Ronai and Cross (1998; see also Rambo-Ronai 1997) drew from Gubrium and colleagues' (1994) work on biographical work to elaborate on the concepts of "narrative resistance" and "discursive constraint." Gubrium et al. (1994:156) defined biographical work as the "ongoing effort to integrate accounts of a person's life," which they argued is "continually subject to reinterpretation because it is always the biography-at-hand." The elements of biography change because of time passage and the context of the situation in which the account is told. For Gubrium et al. (1994:155), "Much of the work of assembling a life story is the management of consistency and continuity, assuring that the past reasonably leads up to the present to form a lifeline." Biographical work is an attempt to "make sense" of his or her life story and experiences.

In this project, we highlight two biographical work processes—discursive constraint and narrative resistance. "Others have the ability to threaten our opinion of ourselves by suggesting negative categories to define ourselves by" (Rambo-Ronai 1997:125). This threat is experienced as "discursive constraint" (Rambo-Ronai 1994, 1997) by an individual. For instance, a woman who had chosen exotic dancing as an occupation may have been told that she was a "slut" by her mother. The mother in this example was attempting to constrain the discourse her daughter could draw upon when constructing her definition of self, in order to control both her identity and her behavior.

According to Simi and Futrell (2009:90), "People resist constraints on identity and expression that flow from established social categories used to label and subject individuals to others' notions of who they are and should be" (Foucault 1979, 1980 in Simi and Futrell 2009:90). Narrative resistance is a response to discursive constraint which serves to decenter the authority of specific individuals or institutions to dictate identity. The resistance strategies that our study participants draw on cast the self in frameworks which make use of the language of race, but frequently reshape it in such a way as to resist taking on a negative identity. By reshaping the resources that the common stocks of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966) offer a stigmatized group to define themselves by, the group in question remaps both their individual identities and their collective place in the terrain of social space. Said in other words, narrative resistance to discursive constraint becomes a way to resist stigma and racial formation projects. Racial formation projects can be overtly interrupted or even redefined.

At times our study participants claimed to resist stigma with behaviors and discourses which overtly disrupted the racial formation projects imposed on them. At other times they resisted by engaging in what appeared to be collaborative behaviors and discourses which upheld the racial formation order. Similar to managing the stigma tied to white supremacist movement activism (Simi and Futrell 2009:91), managing the stigma of being ambiguously raced is a "type of veiled, identity-based resistance that occurs across many everyday contexts. . . . It requires being on constant guard for verbal, symbolic, and, sometimes, physical attacks to self." In this article, we assert that the asking of the question "What are you?" in regards to race is a racial formation project that sets up a social interaction where racial formations are produced and reproduced, or resisted and transformed, through identity, discourse, and behavior.

## METHODS

We analyzed the life narratives ($n = 11$) of seven female and four male individuals who have been asked repeatedly over their life span some version of the question "What are you?" in

regards to their race. While the data were drawn from a Southern metropolitan city, nine out of the eleven participants were not originally from the Southern United States. The participants were located using various non-probability sampling techniques including availability sampling, quota sampling, and snowball sampling.

Six participants identified themselves as multiracial and five identified themselves as monoracial. The racial groups claimed were: black, white, Hispanic (Chilean), Hispanic (Argentinean), Native American, Filipino, Middle Eastern, Indian and Pacific Islander. Participants ranged in age from twenty to sixty-one; however, eight of the eleven participants were in their twenties. All the participants had attended college. Their education ranged from attending two years of college to completing a Ph.D. degree. Participants varied greatly in physical appearance and skin color.

All the participants took part in a digitally recorded, open ended, confidential "life history" interview with the first author that lasted approximately sixty minutes. Prior to the interviews the participants signed informed consent forms and filled out a demographic data sheet. We used pseudonyms provided by the study participants in this manuscript instead of their real names. During the interview process, participants engaged in "biographical work" (Gubrium et al. 1994:156), which is the "ongoing effort to integrate accounts of a person's life" which is, ". . . continually subject to reinterpretation because it is always the biography-at-hand." In the interviews, participants told stories by utilizing their at-hand typifications (Berger and Luckmann 1966) regarding their experiences with the "What are you?" question. When narrating their life stories, participants made claims for themselves and others regarding their place in the sociohistorical racial landscape. It is these claims that ambiguously raced individuals made that serve as the basis for accounting for the racial projects that they resist or collude with.

Rather than imposing pathological identities on our research participants or trying to predict how they will answer the "What are you?" question, this research attempts to give voice to those who are racially ambiguous. We engaged a standpoint approach (Collins 2000), where the racially ambiguous participants' subjectivity was at the center of analysis. bell hooks (1989) expressed the importance of subjectivity in the social construction of knowledge: "As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history" (hooks 1989:42). She further explained, "As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks 1989:42). Collins observed, "Because group standpoints are situated in, reflect, and help shape unjust power relations, standpoints are not static" (2000:25). As our research participants make sense of the "What are you?" question they give us insight into how they construct their own identities, the identities of others, and the nature of stigma and racial formation projects.

## "WHAT ARE YOU?": NEGOTIATING THE RACIAL FORMATION PROJECT

The "What are you?" interaction is complex with many facets and many possibilities for outcomes. In this section we will explore some of the dimensions of these interactions: "Making Assumptions," "Asking the Question," and "When Racial Ambiguity is the Wrong Answer."

## Making Assumptions: The Racial Formation Project Uninterrupted

According to Omi and Winant:

> Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world. (Omi and Winant 1994:106)

Sometimes people do not ask racially ambiguous individuals "What are you?" because, according to our respondents, they assume they already know. They engage in discursive constraint by falsely accusing (Becker 1963) them of being a particular (read that stigmatized or deviant) race they do not identify with. Both Maverick, who racially identified as half Chilean and half white, and Shelby Sioux, who racially identified as half Cherokee Native American and half Irish, provided accounts of how racially ambiguous persons were often mistaken for members of another ethnic group and ostracized as a result. Maverick stated that ". . . it was funny growing up, them, the kids our age, we would get into fights with them, and they would throw rocks at us, because they perceived us as, quote, unquote, Iranian, when we [my siblings and I] weren't even near that nationality." Similarly, Shelby Sioux reported:

> I didn't say this before, but there were times in school, well one time, we were walking to school, and I heard people referring to us as gypsies or thieves. It was really negative and then in school people were talking and saying things. . . . I don't know that I can say it, but it wasn't good . . . the connotation.

If we take these stories as incidents of "what really happened," then in these instances of "making assumptions," a race and the concomitant stigma were assigned and acted on by others. The racial formation project may have been carried out based on mistaken identity, but the racial formation project was not interrupted. Their identities were discursively constrained. There was no ambiguity, no interruption, the loop was completed; none of the racial categories were called into question and the discourses our study participants had available to them to construct their identities were constrained. There was no conversation, no negotiation.

## Asking the Question: The Racial Formation Project Interrupted

Our study participants spent a good deal of time considering aspects of the act of asking the question. Many talked about the "wrong" way and the "right" way to inquire about a person's race, putting the question into question. The participants claimed that the response to the question varied according to how the question was asked. Many also spent time considering why they were asked the question so frequently.

### *Putting the Question into Question*

In short, eight of the eleven research participants claimed many questioners demonstrated poor etiquette when inquiring about their racial identity. Mikil, who identified as Native American, white, and black stated that "Disrespectful questions are like, 'What are you?' and 'Are you mixed and what are you?' Just blunt, very blunt." He claimed his response to the wrong "What are you?"

question was often, "Why is that any of your business?" This form of resistance problematizes the "What are you?" question and interrupts the racial formation project.

Similarly, Sunny Bunns, who racially identified as Palestinian, discussed the wrong way to ask the question. He stated, "It's how they ask the question. They ask you in a very uneducated way. If you're gonna ask the question, ask it correctly, and whatever response you get, take it correctly."

Lolita, who racially identified as an African American with a light skin complexion, framed asking the "What are you?" question as inappropriate as well, "Typically they ask it as if they have a right to know. A few have been rude . . . at the grocery store, on the street. And then people will ask, 'What are you?' And I'm like, 'A woman, a human being!'" Claiming to be a woman and a human being is scathing sarcasm designed to shut down the interaction entirely. It is also a form of narrative resistance. Instead of using racial categories to answer the question, she is offering her gender and her humanity as categories for consideration. These alternative discourses change the conversation so that race is no longer the discursive dimension being applied to her definition of self. In this manner, the racial formation project is interrupted.

Lisa Fares, who identified as Polynesian, stated she sometimes completely ignores the "What are you?" question when she is asked inappropriately. Lisa Fares declared, "Okay, so if it's just some rude guy with no manners and [he] says something smart or some crazy pick up line, I'll ignore them, because that's what they deserve." Ignoring the question shuts down the conversation and interrupts the micro level racial formation project at the interactional level. If the conversation does not happen, the racial formation project is resisted at the behavioral level.

Although participants talked at length about the wrong way to ask the "What are you?" question, they were not as detailed in their explanations of the right way to ask, yet some examples were mentioned. For instance, Lisa Fares described an appropriate way to inquire, "Sometimes people are like, 'I was just wondering, I'm sorry if this is rude, but what are you?' And that's when I'll say, 'I'm Polynesian.'" Similarly, Mikil revealed, "Sometimes they ask, 'What is your ethnicity?'" He claimed his response to this question was a calm, "Why do you ask?" If he liked their response to this inquiry, he would then answer the question.

When someone asked the question, our study participants claimed to seek insight as to why he or she asked the question. Just as those asking the question were seeking out how to think about and act toward a racially ambiguous person, our study participants were trying to figure out how to think about and act toward their questioners. Ignoring the question or answering in a hostile manner interrupts the questioner's attempt to reestablish the normative racial formation order. It serves as an active form of behavioral resistance to the racial formation project. Likewise, asking a questioner about his or her rationale for asking the "What are you?" question helps both parties determine if they want to engage in the racial formation project, and thus in a sense collude with it, or resist it.

### *Why Do They Ask?*

Often in the interviews our study participants tried to make sense of why they in particular were asked the "What are you?" question so frequently. They were working to make sense of this recurring event in their biographical history and to place themselves and it in the larger historical racial landscape as they perceived it. Participants determined that "everyone is hung up on race," that "regional differences matter," and that their own "physical features matter."

*Everyone is Hung Up on Race.* As if they were aware of Omi and Winant's racial formation theory, some respondents concluded that the questioners were "hung up on race." Sunny Bunns stated, "Everybody has stereotypes, so when you meet them, you have to stereotype them and that's what people would do, it was like a light would come on and suddenly they knew where the country was and everything about my religion." Trey Swilley, who racially identified as Filipino and black biracial, said, "Society's curious. To kind of get a grasp of where the person's coming from, 'not saying your race' can tell you everything about that person's background. But a person's race with the community they grew up in tells you a little bit more."

Maverick noted:

> Once they've established some kind of small talk, they feel that there's some kind of rapport with you, so now it's okay to ask that question. Now he's receptive to me asking this question . . . and you think that that [knowing my racial identity] will make a difference in how you interact with me. So now I can say this around you, so now I can do this with you. Oh, okay, I can see if you do these things, oh, you are not supposed to [do] that.

Sunny Bunns, Trey Swilley, and Maverick all reference the idea that people ask the "What are you?" question in order to know how to label and interact with them. Our study participants have a sense that those asking the "What are you?" question are trying to reestablish the normative racial order by establishing their race.

*Regional Differences Matter.* Nine of the eleven participants explained why they were asked the question so frequently by making reference to their own U.S. regional location. Dylan Madison, Jessica, and Lolita appealed to this explanation. Dylan Madison, who self-identified as a Jewish Argentinean, stated:

> It's really funny, because I feel more at home in Miami obviously because people are like me. And no one's going to like wonder, and no one's gonna ask, and no one's going to just assume anything . . . there's so many types of people that no one ever assumes anything.

Likewise, Jessica, who identified as a Hispanic/German biracial, asserted, "Usually I didn't get asked that question in San Diego, because most people thought I was Mexican; because I lived like 20 minutes from Mexico." Similarly, Lolita stated:

> I think there's also a difference having grown up in the DC area, things were a slight bit more progressive than here, because it did amaze me that when I moved here I started getting the comments, you know the "red bone" comments; the "high yellow" comments; "What are you?"; "What are you mixed with?" all over again, where it had kind of subsided in DC. You know it had slowed down? When I came here [Southern City], it was like I stepped back in time and was in junior high school all over again.

Dylan Madison and Jessica, by referring to regional differences, specify population homogeneity, or lack of it, as an explanation as to whether or not people will ask the "What are you?" question. Lolita's assertion that "In the DC area, things were a slight bit more progressive than here," uses region to specify progressiveness, or lack of it, as an explanation for people asking the "What are you?" question.

There may be some truth to our participants' observations. Farley (2002) found that Southern states reported lower percentages of people who marked more than one race category on questionnaires than those in Northern states. Farley attributed this to the South's history of having a firm

color line drawn leaving little room for multiracial persons. In addition, these findings are consistent with Tafoya's (2002) research where she found that cities with higher segregation indices have lower multiracial-multiethnic births. Our research participants reside in a Southern city with a very high segregation index, which according to Tafoya (2002) correlates with a low percentage of multiracial persons. For many Southerners living in highly segregated communities, seeing a racially ambiguous person is infrequent and may trigger a crisis in racial meaning.

*Physical Features Matter.* All eleven of the participants maintained that the physical features of a racially ambiguous person will determine how often they get asked about their race by others. Jessica, who changed her looks and claimed to get different responses, stated:

> I used to have blond hair. I just dyed my hair back dark again. I've had blond hair the past year and a half. So, that's when people were like, "What are you?" You are so tan, but you have blond hair. I think a lot of it had to do with what I looked like last year as to why I got asked so much.

Shelby Sioux, Porsha Davis, and Trey Swilley compared themselves to other racially ambiguous people when they discussed the frequency with which they were asked "What are you?" Shelby Sioux believed that she is not asked as frequently as others, "I really haven't. It would probably be because I don't look real Indian. I actually look more like my mother [Irish]." Porsha Davis, who racially identified as a black–white biracial, acknowledged, "I just thought about it . . . I don't have it as bad as some other biracials may have it. Like, I could probably fit into a black atmosphere easier than someone who is fairer skinned than I am or had more of the, I guess looks, of a Caucasian." Trey Swilley placed himself at the other end of the continuum:

> My little sister didn't catch it as much; because she didn't look as mixed I guess you could say. My older sister doesn't look as mixed I guess you could say. My older sister is darker than me. I guess her hair kind of gave her away, and my little sister looks like she could be white. I probably caught more of it than all of them.

Shelby Sioux and Porsha Davis asserted that they were not asked as often as others because of their physical features, while Trey Swilley stated his physical features were more ambiguous than his siblings' features and thus he "caught more of it."

Our participants explained how often they were asked the "What are you?" question by appealing to their own knowledge about race and appearance, thus engaging in their own racial formation projects and seemingly colluding with the enemy. They were not narratively or behaviorally resisting. In some cases they compared their physical characteristics with that of other racially ambiguous persons. Appearance served as a micro level narrative resource to explain the frequency with which they were asked "What are you?" They viewed their own physical appearance through the eyes of the questioner to explain why the questioner initiated the question, thus reifying the racial formation project. Our racially ambiguous respondents did not claim that stereotypical ideas about racial groups' physical characteristics were true or not true. They simply recognized that the stereotypical imagery is perceived as real in today's society, and compared themselves to the images to better articulate and explain the "What are you?" question.

## When Racial Ambiguity is the Wrong Answer

One major theme that emerged from the interview data was that our participants claimed to have received stigmatizing discourse leveled at them specifically because of their perceived racial

ambiguity—they were the recipients of discursive constraint. The study participants' racial ambiguity was problematic because it disrupted the racial formation project by threatening the racial formation order. Study participants specified three ways they experienced stigma and discursive constraint for having an ambiguous racial appearance: not enough, racial slurs targeted at their racial identity, and the stuck-up phenomenon. In each instance when the racial formation project is threatened by racial ambiguity, discursive constraint is engaged in by those who ask the "What are you?" question in an attempt to restore the normative racial formation order.

### *Not Enough*

One form of stigma described by our study participants was being accused of not being "enough" of a certain race and/or being told that they were not really the race that they identified as. Lolita, Shelby Sioux, and Trey Swilley made statements that illustrate this phenomenon:

> I went through a period of being quite radical and wanting to express that I am an African American. . . . I went through a rites of passage program and was really proud of going through this African centered rites of passage program where I received this new name. So, this was like in 10th grade, and I come back to school after the weekend of the retreat. And I tell everybody that I'm African and have this new name, and the response that I got from everybody, "there's nothing African about you. You're not African American. You're barely black." (Lolita)

> If people [Native American] weren't happy with what you were doing, people would refer to me as, "oh, she's white" . . . in the Native American community, I'm not dark enough or I don't look [Native American] enough. (Shelby Sioux)

> Here in the South a police officer pulled me over for speeding and asked me if I thought I was actually black. I got upset with him, because he actually asked me if I *thought* [italics added] I was black. (Trey Swilley)

Lolita, Shelby Sioux, and Trey Swilley were told they were "not enough" of a certain race by others. Others aimed to spoil their identity by negating and discrediting what they (Lolita, Shelby Sioux, and Trey Swilley) asserted as their racial identities. These accounts are examples of discursive constraint as a micro level racial formation project. Others sought to deny the racial identities claimed by our study participants by negating their claim and repositioning the racial identity where they thought it should be located in the racial formation order. This correction, or constraint on their discourse about themselves, served as a micro level racial formation project. This redefinition of the situation upheld stereotypes about race and physical appearance and resolved the crisis of racial meaning invoked by their perceived racial ambiguity.

### *Racial Slurs*

Many of the participants shared with us that racial slurs were often the response after the "What are you?" question was answered. Sunny Bunns disclosed that, "They would make stupid comments like camel jockey . . . they'll say sand nigger." Likewise, Mikil recalled racist comments targeted at him once they found out his racial identity:

> They would always call me an Oreo, because they found out my mom married a mixed guy. . . . I would always get into fights about that because me and my sister always went to school together and either she would get called mud and I would defend her or it would be vice versa.

Similarly, Porsha Davis remembered being called names like, "White girl or . . . half-breed" once they discovered she classified herself as a black–white biracial.

These accounts give a vivid snapshot of one type of aftermath of the "What are you?" racial project. Questioners sought to find out what racial identity would be claimed by our study participants in order to categorize them. Upon finding out their racial identity, the questioners stigmatized them as racially inferior and proceeded to carry out racism in the form of racial slurs. In this fashion, racially ambiguous people often experience dual stigmas: abominations of the body stigmatization before racial classification and tribal stigmatization after being racially classified. By stigmatizing and spoiling the identities of races they deem inferior, they uphold and maintain the existing racial hierarchy, completing the racial formation project.

### *The "Stuck-Up" Phenomenon*

The "stuck-up" phenomenon emerged as another form of discursive constraint. Six participants in this study reported that people other than their close friends and family members stated they were "stuck up." Some of the participants disclosed specific incidents, while others simply stated that they thought others perceived them as stuck-up. Labeling a person as stuck-up or saying that "They think they are better" spoils the identity of the person. It is essential to note that this form of stigmatization and discursive constraint often takes place intraracially. When this occurs it is referred to as the color complex (Russell et al. 1992). Similarly, Rockquemore (2002:492) found that ". . . appearances were symbolically and linguistically linked to Black identity as respondents repeatedly were told by Black women that they 'thought they were better' than other Blacks."

Jessica and Lisa Fares both said they believe others think they are a "bitch." Jessica said, "Technically when most people look at me, they always say they thought I was a bitch." Lisa Fares stated, "They probably have seen me and think I'm the 'b' word." Mikil similarly stated, "They think I'm stuck up and conceited." Sunny Bunns proclaimed, "I'm considered to be very conceited." Porsha Davis similarly responded, "I think their first perception is that I might be stuck up or rude . . . you know, just making comments like, 'you think you're cute.' It'd be stuff like, 'because you're lighter' or 'you have the good hair.'" Likewise, Dylan Madison contended, "They just thought I was just stuck up or something . . . they thought I thought I was better than everyone or something." Trey Swilley spoke of his experiences with the stuck-up phenomenon, "I've been told that I seem like I'm stuck up because I'm closed off if I don't know who you are." Lolita expressed her thoughts on why others sometimes view her as stuck-up and acknowledged that "If you're really serious; you can't be. You almost can't be [serious] when you're light skinned in order for people to let down their guard around you. You have to let them know very early that you're relaxed and down to earth."

These are articulations of the racial formation order being expressed by our study participants regarding themselves and others. If our respondents' claims are to be taken as accurate accounts of events, then racial slurs disguised as backhanded compliments serve as micro level racial identity formation projects which serve to simultaneously stigmatize the ambiguously raced individual for not conforming to their expectations about race and to reinforce and legitimate the hierarchy coded in the larger racial formation order.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we have questioned and problematized the act of asking the "What are you?" question at both the interactional and institutional levels. While this research is not specifically about the status of being mixed raced, biracial, or multiracial, for those who do claim these identities and are unable to pass as monoracial, being asked this question frequently is a feature of their everyday lives and merits attention. At the interactional level, through resistance and discursive constraint, the racial formation project becomes a contest over identity claims. At the institutional level, it becomes a contest over the definition of race itself. The dialectic between identity, interaction, and institutions serves to create, maintain, and destroy both the definitional and hierarchical dimensions of race. We also argue that it endangers the racial formation project itself.

We addressed race as a process that is accomplished, or not, through the "What are you?" encounter rather than treating it as a variable through which to map other phenomena. We have synthesized aspects of racial formation theory and theories of deviance and stigma to gain insight into how race as an idea is socially produced and reproduced or resisted. The "What are you?" question cast as a racial formation project is dependent on stigma as a form of social control. Discursive constraint in the form of making assumptions, being told you are "not enough" or "stuck up," or in the form of racial slurs, is a racial formation project which serves as an attempt to restore the normative racial formation order. Resistance that puts the question into question such as framing the question as inappropriate, framing the questioner as "hung up on race," refusing to answer based on racial categories, or even refusing to answer the question at all, empowers our study participants to chart many possible courses of action regarding racial formation projects.

This article used life history interview data to provide an overview of some of the impacts of having one's racial identity repeatedly brought into question. We have introduced the concept of racial ambiguity as a frame which eschews codifying race as "real" while at the same time acknowledging that racial stereotypes are taken to be real in everyday life and thus are real in their consequences. Race is an ever evolving fiction with no basis in biology (Omi and Winant 1994). Racial ambiguity as a concept allows us to hold on to the concept of race lightly as we bring into question the realities of questioning race. Racial ambiguity as a perceived reality serves as a symbolic rip in the social fabric of racial formation and brings up many questions.

The inability to racially classify brings into question the racial formation order itself. For Omi and Winant, "The seemingly obvious, 'natural' and 'common sense' qualities which the existing racial order exhibits themselves testify to the effectiveness of the racial formation process in constructing racial meanings and racial identities" (1994:12). When someone is racially unclassifiable, it is a breach (Garfinkel 1967) of the racial formation order and what is "natural" is brought into question. According to Crawford, "The challenge posed by racial 'hybridity' to a modern racial classification system remains. It serves as a reminder of the impossibility of 'races' as 'pure' and 'natural' groups, and subsequently, the impossibility of any system that attempts to categorize on this basis" (Crawford 2007:73). If one claims a racially mixed identity, but one passes as monoracial, there is no stigma, there is no ambiguity, the racial formation project is not interrupted. When one is racially ambiguous, even when they self-identify as being monoracial, not only does the racial formation order and the concomitant ranking come into question, but the entire racial formation project itself is in danger of evaporating. It literally makes no sense. Race becomes a shifty idea that potentially changes with each interaction. Many of our subjects

mentioned the idea of a protean identity (Rockquemore 2002), in which they claimed different races in different situations, depending on the rewards and punishments for doing so.

If we take the next step, we might consider other sites where identity is questioned or even contested in this manner. What of instances where a person's gender is unclear? What about sexual orientation? If so, we might speak of stigma and discursive constraint as supporting a gender formation project or a sexual orientation formation project in terms of "process[es] of historically situated *projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (Omi and Winant 1994:56). They too might be thought of as deviant or problematic until the ambiguity is resolved and the formation order restored. One can conceive of other social situations where being unclassifiable is stigmatizable until such a time as that ambiguity is resolved—social status, educational attainment—any social situation where hierarchy exists.

By focusing on statuses such as being mixed raced, biracial, or multiracial, researchers focus attention on how the study participant will self-identify. Rather than trying to predict how people would answer the question on questionnaires or in interactions, we explored how asking the question at the individual and institutional level can be construed as a racial formation project. Instead of trying to establish whether having an ambiguous racial identity is problematic or not, we have problematized the act of questioning someone's racial identity. Instead of reifying race as a codified variable, we have explored race as something that is socially constructed and accomplished or resisted in social interaction. By including an analysis of stigma, discursive constraint, and resistance within these interactions, we have shown how stigma becomes an important component in the maintenance of the racial formation order.

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