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MIXED RACE AMERICA

THOUGHTS, MUSINGS, AND OBSERVATIONS ABOUT RACE IN AMERICA, PARTICULARLY THE MIXING OF RACE--IN ALL THE WAYS YOU CAN IMAGINE: PEOPLE OF VARIOUS RACES INTERACTING, PEOPLE OF VARIOUS RACES NOT WANTING TO MIX, ISSUES OF PURITY, HYBRIDITY, MULTIPLICITY, HETEROGENEITY, AND ANY OTHER WAY YOU CAN DESCRIBE THE BLENDING, MELDING, MELTING, TOSSING, TURNING, CHURNING OF RACE RELATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2011

Are Jewish people a race?

The question in this blog's title was one posed to me by one of my student's after class recently. Actually, the question was more sophisticated. I had been lecturing, in class, about terms like "race," "racism," "anti-racism," and "white privilege." And I had talked about the racial pentagram--the way that we (meaning most people in the U.S.) talk about race as if there were 5 predominant categories: black, white, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic, and American Indian/Native American. I said that of course I wasn't saying that this was a good thing or trying to reinforce that we should only acknowledge 5 and only 5 races--that in fact our understanding of racial groups and racial formation is an ongoing and flexible thing--and that we may be talking about a racial hexagram soon since increasingly Arab and Muslim Americans are being racialized into their own category in the U.S.

So my student, after class, asked what I thought about Jewish people being considered a separate race in the U.S. And I said that certainly not that long ago, Jewish people were, indeed, considered a separate race in the U.S. and certainly around the world. And that anti-semitism is still with us--there are people who continue to discriminate against Jewish people based simply, sadly, and solely on their Jewishness. But I also said that with respect to how we think about race currently in the U.S. it was complicated because similar to either mixed race individuals whose multiraciality may include whiteness or with Latino/Hispanics, Jewish people whose phenotype trends white have white skin privilege because their Jewishness, at least at first sight, is not going to be apparent. And I said that like with all types of identities, there are elements of intersectionality that informs times when we exercise more or less privilege and find ourselves in oppressed or minoritized positions versus in majority positions. As an Asian American woman, I am seemingly in a minoritized position by my race and gender, yet as a straight identified, able bodied person who holds a PhD and a position at a research university, I exercise privilege in very tangible ways.

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SOME RULES WHILE VISITING THIS BLOG...

Hello! Welcome to "Mixed Race America." A few rules now that this blog is once again "public" (meaning, you no longer need to sign-in to read this blog):

1) Please leave a comment! I really am interested in hearing what others have to say. You cannot leave anonymous comments (which means you do have to have a gmail account), and you must comply with rule #2, but aside from these things, I really want to hear from YOU.

2) Please be respectful in your comments. I reserve the right to moderate all comments, which means deleting comments I believe are disrespectful, rude, or which generally devolve into ad-hominem attacks. I don't mean that people should not engage with what I'm writing (or others have written) and I'm not looking to "preach to the choir." But I also believe that the best way to be heard is through respectful discourse--at best, we can just agree to disagree.

So I thought about all of this when I watched the film [Sarah's Key](#) yesterday. It is a film that I hope everyone watches, because it tells an incredibly moving story. And more importantly, it reminds us of an underdiscussed moment in history--the round-up and deportation of over 13,000 Jewish immigrants and refugees (and their French-born children and grandchildren) on July 16 and 17, 1942 in Vichy France--what is commonly referred to as the Vel d'Hiv (a shortening of Velodrome d'Hiver--which was the winter stadium in which these 13,000 people languished for days before being transported to transit camps in the countryside before being finally shipped off to Auschwitz). [Click here](#) for an article about the filmmaker's motivations for making the film.

The film was incredibly moving and powerful -- and an important scene in the film (and don't worry, this isn't going to spoil anything in terms of a plot point in the story) is when one character expresses disgust at the way that the average French citizens did nothing to stop this atrocity. And another character asks her what she would have done had she been there--how would she have protested or tried to stop this from happening? Would she have the courage, during the German occupation of France, to risk her life or the lives of her family to help a group of people being persecuted by the state?

This is the question I ask myself when I insert myself back in WWII in California when posters announcing the roundup of Japanese Americans were plastered all over the state. Or in the mid-1950s on segregated busses in the South. Or in the era of apartheid in South Africa. I think we all want to believe that we'd be brave--we'd stand up and speak truth to power--that we would risk our lives for our beliefs. But I don't know.

And honestly, if we look at history, over and over again, people often don't. They look after themselves rather than others. There are, of course, extraordinary exceptions--and these exceptions are important. At any rate, I think that films like *Sarah's Key* and my student's question are important reminders about the fact that it was not that long ago that Jewish people were racialized into an oppressed category in the U.S. -- the Holocaust may feel like the past, but it was not that long ago that Hitler's final solution was enacted all over Europe and 6 million people were murdered because enough people didn't believe in their humanity. And that is the ultimate form of racism--believing that another race isn't even human.

POSTED BY JENNIFER AT 7:52 AM 

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SOME LINKS TO LOOK AT

[ALIST Magazine](#)

[Amy & Shaun](#)

[Angry Little Girls](#)

[Asian American Writer's Workshop](#)

[Association for Asian American Studies](#)

[Center for Asian American Media Hapa Studies](#)

[IM Diversity](#)

[Mavin Foundation](#)

[Mixed Asians](#)

[Mixed Heritage Center](#)

[The New York Times](#)

[This American Life](#)

BLOGS I LIKE

LABELS: JEWISH PEOPLE AS A RACIAL CATEGORY, SARAH'S KEY, SPEAKING TRUTH TO JUSTICE IN THE PAST, THE HOLOCAUST

12 COMMENTS:



Dianne said...

There is a social amnesia about racism that is difficult to change. Even present day racism is somehow diminished or assigned to an individual, oftentimes, while others protest that they are not racist and don't support racism. Post-racialism is a faraway ideal -- being our best selves and thinking the same of others until an individual gives us pause to think otherwise due to behavior and not race, gender, socio-economic status or ethnicity. The history of mankind is littered with prejudice, oppression and violence, and I suppose in some ways forgetting, not becoming involved, and thinking of oneself as different from the masses, makes it all the more palatable. Keep up the good fight through teaching and writing. I'm trying to do the same by writing about my experiences.

SEPTEMBER 6, 2011 AT 11:28 AM

lovepeaceohana said...

I think we all want to believe that we'd be brave--we'd stand up and speak truth to power--that we would risk our lives for our beliefs. But I don't know.

Truth, here. My answer would have been very different four years ago, but I didn't have children then - and I fully anticipate that it will change again, as they grow older and more capable of caring for themselves, more capable of choosing their own path through the struggle. That doesn't mean that I need to sit out all activism; I'm certainly doing my best to raise them with an awareness of social justice and ways to redress oppression! But it does mean that, at this stage, I don't think I could risk my life for unknown others. Maybe someday my children will think me a coward for that - but as long as I'm around to hear it, I hope I'll consider it a blessing.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2011 AT 1:50 AM

Richard Quan said...

Hi Professor!

I am wondering if you had any good links to discussion about mixed heritage peoples who are not "half and half".

About Race

American Studier

Amy and Shaun Tumblr

Angry Asian Man

Citizen of Somewhere Else

Fizzle

Gilesbot 9000

John Raible Online (Transracial Adoption Support)

Land of the Not So Calm

Lesboprof

Love Isn't Enough (formerly Anti-Racist Parent)

Mixed American Life

Native Appropriations

Race Files

Racialicious

Reassigned Time

Resist Racism

Tenured Radical

The Globe is a Ball (Sports & Social Justice)

This Week in Blackness

What Tami Said

MRA POSTS ABOUT MIXED-RACE ISSUES (KEY SELECTIONS)

Mixed race reading (and viewing)

Doing the right thing: a history of California's marriage laws

How do I feel about "hapa"?

Gee, you don't look "Asian"...

Magazine Plug: Hyphen's Hybrid Issue

A Mixed Race Medley--Multiple Plugs

Beyond the Racial Pentagon

Rest in Peace Mildred Loving

Mixed Race America--how does it begin?

Monday's Mixed-race Musings

Resource Plug: Mixed Heritage Center

Multiracial Jamaica?

As the son of a half Chinese half Salvadoran father and a Chinese mother, and as a person who looks Asian according to the social stereotypes, I've always wondered about self-identification. When is the amount too little? I would decree it a personal freedom to self-identify as anything one wants to identify as, but .. I'm just a confused person.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2011 AT 2:21 AM

Dianne said...

lovepeaceohana, I understand being protective of your children. I'm a mother, too, of interracial twins. They are grown now. I felt compelled to speak out. Just like the parents who sent their children to the school protected by armed guards because they dreamed that integration would equalize the races. Or the children of illegal immigrants who are protesting in Charlotte, NC. They've lived almost their whole lives in America -- they didn't choose to come here. They were small children. They are American for all intents and purposes, but they do not have access to education and jobs. Their protests may get them deported to a country they don't even remember. They don't do it just for themselves, they do it for those who come after them.

One other thing I thought about as a mother. I believed I needed to advocate for all the children at my daughters' school, especially those children whose parents could not advocate for them because of language barriers, no ability to get to the school, fear of authority figures, whatever the reason. I knew my children had good advocates in their parents and I knew advocating for others would make a better world for my children. I got in trouble with the all white, middle class PTA officers over an article I wrote in the school newsletter that I edited. Then the police called me because I talked about the way the officer on duty had let white parents walk into the school but stopped my husband. Long story, but despite the fear I felt, I knew I had to speak up and when confronted I did not back down.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2011 AT 9:26 AM

Julie Fischer said...

I grapple with this question often. Growing up, I was indignant to learn that the general public would consistently categorize one part of me as "just white" when I would take great care to

Barack Obama is our first (fill-in-the-blank)

Link Love for Anti-Racist & Multiracial Families

MRA POSTS ABOUT ANTI-RACIST ACTIVISM AND EDUCATION (KEY SELECTIONS)

Allies

Can I be racist?

Do we have to choose between racism and sexism?

Individual Bigotry & Institutional Racism

The White Spokesperson

Living the Anti-Racist Praxis

Getting rid of race

Reverse Racism!

Defining Racism

What, exactly, IS "race" (or is it just race)?

Over-sensitive & In-sensitive about Race

Excuse me, America, can we talk about race now?

Reading about race

MRA POSTS ABOUT ASIAN AMERICAN ISSUES (KEY SELECTIONS)

At what point does the Asian immigrant become an Asian American?

Do I Need to Travel to China?

Asian American identity

I'm Proud to be a Chinese American!

How do I know I'm Asian American?

Repeating History

The last word on APA heritage: Beau Sia

From Dragonlady to White Castle: Asian Americans in Film

The many faces of "Orientalism"

Spotlight on Yuri Kochiyama--Asian

specify that *I'm not like that at all* - I'm part Ashkenazi Jew, dammit.

But the fact remains that I *am* afforded social and institutional privileges because those same people, at least in the context of the U.S., are taught to read my phenotype in that regard, no matter how reductive or imagined it is.

I didn't realize how much I had internalized this view of "Jewish = white" until I traveled to Israel recently. Frankly, I was expecting to encounter people who looked like one side of my family, but was surprised and happy to find myself around lots of Mizrahim, Felasha, Sudanese, Thai, Chinese, etc.

Of course, I'm glossing over the ethnic and cultural tensions underscoring the body politic of Israel, but my larger point is that the face of the Jewish people is no more monochromatic than, for example, that of Latinos or Asians.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2011 AT 9:51 PM

Matt said...

I'm sure Sarah's Key is as moving as you say and has an important place, but I really wish people would talk more about the Evian conference, the St. Louis and the SS Struma.

And I wish people talked about how Jews had achieved near equality in Germany in terms of wealth, so that many turned toward careers, like professor, that offered more prestige than wealth. I wish people knew how marginalized overt Judenhass was and how much Jews were a part of the cultural scene in Berlin.

Because I really get the feeling that a lot of people misunderstand what it was that wasn't that long ago and misunderstand the ways in which things have and haven't changed for Jews. I think this is why it seems so much like the ancient past to so many people and why a lot of people have trouble understanding when whiteness isn't the only or most relevant thing.

SEPTEMBER 14, 2011 AT 11:25 PM

Mixed/Other said...

To hazard and answer to the question: I think the Jewish people represent not only a religion, but also a distinct culture

American activist

A PSA: Consider joining the bone marrow registry

Debunking the model minority myth

BLOG ARCHIVE

▶ 2013 (4)

▶ 2012 (41)

▼ 2011 (34)

▶ November (2)

▶ October (3)

▼ September (3)

An open letter to the UC Berkley College Republica...

Putting my money where my mouth (or ethics) is

Are Jewish people a race?

▶ August (1)

▶ July (2)

▶ June (3)

▶ May (3)

▶ April (2)

▶ March (3)

▶ February (7)

▶ January (5)

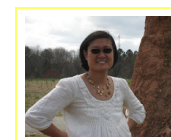
▶ 2010 (74)

▶ 2009 (157)

▶ 2008 (230)

▶ 2007 (121)

WHO I AM



JENNIFER

A 40-something professor of contemporary

American literature and Asian American literature interested in issues of social justice and specifically

replete with distinct language, history, and physical characteristics. These items combined, in my view, would set them apart as a race.

Regarding the issue of prejudice, I would argue that our culture does not suffer from social amnesia; but rather in this very politically correct culture we have developed a spirit of plausible deniability that we use to distance ourselves from the very sensitive issues which require accountability. For example, younger "white" people who don't know or understand enough about the civil rights movement or slavery to know that mocking it in some way is wrong and hurtful. But when confronted, they reply, "I didn't know" or "I didn't do it" or "It wasn't me that did it."

When I have the chance, I like to remind BOTH parties involved that the height of the civil rights movement was only 42 years ago. And ideas don't die nearly as fast as people do. It all takes time, patience and forgiveness and determination to kill an idea.

The saddest part is that human kind, or the human race, will undoubtedly find new ways to segregate and classify themselves because of our innate insecurities. If we do manage to root out racism, is there another ism that we should be prepared to combat?

How shall we best treat the real human condition? And how do we get this treatment to the people who need it most...us?

SEPTEMBER 16, 2011 AT 1:09 AM

Julia said...

hey jen, Could we cross-post this to LIE? It's a great one....

Thanks,
julia
(team@loveisntenough.com)

p.s. Hooray for your honeymoon! I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.

SEPTEMBER 21, 2011 AT 1:28 PM

Zek J Evets said...

Hi, this is my first time commenting here.

how to create spaces to talk comfortably (and sometimes uncomfortably) about race.

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JENNIFER'S CURRENT BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

A Visit from the Goon Squad -- Jennifer Egan
Partly Colored: Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South -- Leslie Bow
Bitter in the Mouth -- Monique Truong
Run -- Ann Patchett
The Story of Edgar Sawtelle -- David Wroblewski
War Dances -- Sherman Alexie
The Good Thief -- Hannah Tinti
One! Hundred! Demons! -- Lynda Barry
A Mercy -- Toni Morrison
The Elegance of the Hedgehog -- Muriel Barbery
Wrack and Ruin -- Don Lee
The Plague of Doves -- Louise Erdrich
The Yiddish Policeman's Union -- Michael Chabon
Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, Exoticism in Modern America -- Henry Yu
Behold the Many -- Lois-Ann Yamanaka
A Long Stay in a Distant Land -- Chieh Chieng
Disoriented -- Robert Chang
Postcolonial Melancholia -- Paul Gilroy
Free Food for Millionaires -- Min Jin Lee
American Inquisition -- Eric Muller
Stealing Buddha's Dinner -- Bich Minh Nguyen
A Wrinkle in Time -- Madeline L'Engel

As a White-Jewish person contemplating the future of my relationship with a Black woman -- marriage, kids, etc -- I have already made the distinction that Jews ARE NOT a race. Why? Because what does that make Black-Jews? Mixed-race? Multi-racial? Racially Double-down? Judaism is a religion. Jewish heritage is a culture. These things are often inherited, but they are not genetically reproduced -- no matter what the Orthodox may say -- via "Jewish" genes passed down since the Diaspora.

My mixed-race kids will be Jewish because they are raised Jewish, taught Jewish history, and complete their Bar/Bat'Mitzvah. They will be Jews because they have been enculturated as such, and if they so choose they will be able to carry on that tradition.

Meanwhile, I see myself as White AND Jewish, because no matter my personal history of dealing with overt acts of anti-Semitism, or even subtle ones, I still possess White privilege. And it is this personal realization which began my discovery that being Jewish -- at least in America -- is not a race. It is not equivalent to being Black.

It is close! It is close in much the same way that so many Muslims are experiencing in America. But to make that a firm comparison, or equivalency is to ignore the very real attempts by Jews (and maybe some Muslims?) to cling to their White privilege, to engage in secularization to the point that they actively pretend that they are not Jewish. And to subsequently participate in White supremacy, and racism.

Fitting in is difficult in America. The intersectionality of identity is multifaceted, often contradictory, but it also affords us the unique space to create a personal sense of Who We Are, even as others attempt to homogenize us, juxtapose us, and place us into Neat Little Ticky Tack boxes for their convenience.

Yet I cannot do these things. Because I know that being, which by that I mean my/your/our Being isn't something simple.

OCTOBER 11, 2011 AT 3:29 PM

Matt said...

With respect to those who sincerely tried to answer the question in the title, I think that's the wrong way to go about

History of Love -- Nicole Krauss

Moo -- Jane Smiley

The God of Small Things -- Arundhati Roy

Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s -- Michael Howard and Omi Winant

Paradise -- Toni Morrison

The Love Wife -- Gish Jen

East of Eden -- John Steinbeck

Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique -- Kandice Chuh

Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics -- Lisa Lowe

My Year of Meats -- Ruth Ozeki

Monkey Hunting -- Cristina Garcia

Aloft -- Chang-rae Lee

Selections from Gramsci's Prison Notebook -- Antonio Gramsci

Dreams from My Father -- Barack Obama

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WHERE DID YOU COME FROM?

answering the question.

I usually describe myself as Jewish and white. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz says we should think of all Jews as people of color because it leads to greater solidarity. Both of us think recognizing white privilege is important.

But often the question, "Are Jews a Race?" is about something else. It's about whether antisemitism is as much of a problem as racism. About whether people concerned with racism should be concerned with antisemitism.

I'm afraid to say, antisemitism is just not on the radar for the vast majority of anti-racist activists, usually because ignorance about the nature of antisemitism means they can't see it all around them. Sometimes people notice that antisemitism isn't being talked about among anti-racists (except in the most token ways), and they wonder if that's right. Or, just as often, they're looking for a way to justify that exclusion. They want a reason to not give Jews the same sort of sensitive responses they would give "real" (it's a persistent stereotype that Jews aren't real or authentic) people of color. When Jews are pit against other minorities and oppressed groups (this is a common feature of antisemitism), Leftists can actually get downright ugly.

This is a time when many Jews are as anxious about antisemitism as we've been in many decades. Instead of trying to understand why, a lot of people are trying to explain it by finding fault with Jews.

When "Are Jews a race?" becomes about whether antisemitism is important, then it's a deeply flawed question. It's like asking "Are gays a race?" The real question is "Are Jews still oppressed?" The answer to that is emphatically, YES.

OCTOBER 16, 2011 AT 8:53 AM

Jennifer said...

Thanks, everyone, for your very thought provoking comments. I know that there is a lot of food for thought here, which is one reason I didn't decide to chime in with a response too soon.

I think the only thing I'll say is that I do think we have a social amnesia about historical events like The Holocaust and the fact that anti-semitism is alive and well--it hasn't gone away, it's

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A visitor from Pomona, California viewed

just mutated. That's the thing about forms of oppression and hatred--they often don't disappear (at least not overnight) they have an insidious flexibility to change into other forms--and so we may not be seeing anti-semitism mark itself so blatantly through institutional forms--but prejudice against Jewish people is still out there. So maybe it's not so important that we answer the question about Jewish people being a race (I was only ever being tongue-in-cheek/provocative about that title anyway)--it is, as one commenter said, important to ask whether Jewish people still feel targeted because of their Jewishness.

OCTOBER 19, 2011 AT 7:40 AM

Jennifer said...

Richard Quan,

Thanks for your question about links to mixed heritage people--I'm not sure if you looked at some of the links on the right side of this blog--that's the first place to start--and if I think of others, I'll let you know. I'll be doing an overhaul of the blog this weekend.

OCTOBER 19, 2011 AT 7:41 AM

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Introduction

A 40-something professor of contemporary American literature and Asian American literature interested in issues of social justice and specifically how to create spaces to talk comfortably (and sometimes uncomfortably) about race.

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