

Visualizing a Critical Mixed-Race Theory

ABSTRACT: In this paper, questions regarding the cultural understanding of mixed race are explored, which have the ability to complicate the accepted portrayal of race in society as a black/white binary system. Thus, the acknowledgement of something other than this binary system offers new ways of theorizing about race, particularly concerning the sociopolitical implications of mixed-race designation. This paper argues that the visually mixed-race person has a certain direct ability to challenge the binary and its racist logic. Furthermore, this paper goes on to offer a unique interpretation of where power for working against a racially oppressive system lies within critical mixed-race theory.



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I was in kindergarten when I had a clear understanding of the racialized world in which we live, when I had to check a box on my school registration papers recognizing myself as either black or white. This simple action can be quite complicated when one is a daughter of a black father and white mother. I was finally offered the choice of "mixed" by the time I reached Jr. High. But what is this concept of "mixed" and what does it offer a nation still infused with racism years after the time period known as the "Civil Rights Era" has ended?

Questions of mixed race bring with them complications to the established black/white

binary system and thus offer new ways of theorizing race as well as the sociopolitical implications of mixed race designation. As Lewis Gordon states, "In spite of contemporary resistance to 'binary' analyses, a critical discussion of mixed-race categories calls for an understanding of how binary logic functions in discourses on race and racism. Without binaries, no racism will exist."¹ Can a breakdown of the current binary logic, which places social and political advantages on white individuals, occur with the inception of a critical mixed race theory? And could this lead to a society free of racism?

This essay will focus on the views of theorists

Lewis Gordon and Naomi Zack and their conceptions of the racial binary system and mixed race. I will begin by looking at both theorists' views on the racial binary system, posing the question, "How do we understand the spectrum of race?" From there, I will explore the approaches each theorist offers for deconstructing the binary, followed by a comparison and critique of both theorizations, with the end goal of offering my own interpretation of where power for working against a racially oppressive system lies within a critical mixed race theory. It is my view that what often gets overlooked in these theorizations is the effect of visual incoherency to the black/white binary that can be provided by the mixed race individual. The concept of the "visibly mixed race person" will be used in this essay to explore the transformative areas for a society still enmeshed in the ugly history of racism.

Interpretations of the Racial Binary System

Zack's book *Race and Mixed Race* focuses on American categories of racial inheritance and racial identification. For Zack, the racial binary is understood clearly as black/white because modes of inheritance and identification are set up such that an individual fits in either one or the other. As she describes, the ordinary concept of race rests solely on the "asymmetrical kinship schema" (commonly referred to as the "one drop rule"). In this schema, having at least one black relative any number of generations back is a sufficient condition to be categorized "black." For an individual to be designated white, all of his or her past relatives must have been white.

As Zack notes,

The schema implies that both whiteness and blackness are defined in terms of blackness. Thus American racial categories are interdependent, and because there is no positive definition of blackness, American racial categories are groundless—they have no empirical foundation.²

Since race has no adequate scientific basis, Zack maintains that "black and white racial designations are themselves racist."³ Furthermore, she argues, the binary American racial system precludes a "mixed race" category. Therefore, for Zack, the binary of race in the United States is understood as distinct poles of black and white, upheld by paradigmatic ideals of "pure" American blacks and "pure" American whites as coded by the racist logic of the kinship schema.

In contrast, Gordon formulates the idea of the binary as a sliding scale hierarchy in which the division is into white and non-white. Gordon bases this on the lived experience and sociopolitical implications of appearing "more white" or "less black." He describes whiteness as the 'sphere of normativity' and against which everything is compared.⁴ Whiteness exists as the norm and stands at the top of the social value system. Thus follows Gordon's more hierarchical yet still Manichean framework. The divisions within each pole describe mutually exclusive, antagonistic categories of value and offer a more fluid concept of "blackness" or "whiteness" based on the varying degree of skin tone. This measure of degree benefits lighter skin by placing it towards the top of the hierarchy.

1. Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997): 66

2. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994): 11

3. Ibid: 3

4. Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997)



Gordon describes the binary as having two main principles: “(1) be white ... (2) don’t be black.”⁵ Here is the major difference between Zack and Gordon. Based on Zack’s binary, a mixed race category is disallowed. Gordon’s analysis accounts for mixed race *within* binary racial logic. However, both agree that any binary construction stands to have racist foundations and thus should be deconstructed.

Approaches to Breaking down the Racial Binary

Zack posits that having more people self-identify as “mixed race” will work as a way to break down her theoretical binary, where any designation other than “black” or “white” violates the established binary. Thus, establishing oneself as “mixed” will work in eradicating racism by causing a breakdown of the system that sustains it.

Zack argues that creating a racial *identity* is existentially harmful to the individual because race is a myth perpetuated by the oppressors and thus, racial (black/white) designations should be rejected. Rejecting these *ordinary* concepts of race within the binary (such as “black” or “white”) could lead to the eradication of racism in her view. The moment of confusion and the need for new social constructions after eliminating current concepts of race is seen as an opportunity to end racism. The “mixed race” designation stands as the “anti-race” as it refuses to be reduced to established categories and thus creates the opportunity to transform current cultural constructions.

In contrast, Gordon argues against mixed-race identification as a method to eradicate racism

because of the antiblack racist context. He argues that a fundamental change in this racial binary logic must occur and a critical mixed-race position to this contention cannot accomplish these goals. Both of these principles (1- be white and 2-don’t be black) must be rejected in order to eliminate the racist foundation of the racial binary and therefore, racism itself.

A mixed-race racial position is compatible with the rejection of principle (1), but it is not compatible with the rejection of principle (2). That is because there is no way to reject the thesis that there is something wrong with being black beyond the willingness to “be” black—not in terms of convenient fads of playing blackness, but by paying the social costs of anti-blackness on a global scale. Against the raceless credo, then, racism cannot be rejected without a dialectic in which humanity experiences a blackened world.⁶

Gordon makes the argument that because of the sliding scale hierarchy of binary racial logic and the existence of whiteness as the normative (and thus raceless) standpoint, if a mixed race individual wishes to affirm both her blackness and whiteness as equals, with the outward designation of mixed race, she runs into difficulties. Naturally, one cannot “equalize” elements that are not perceived as equals in the sociopolitical world without gaining “unequal” sociopolitical consequences. We can see that an equalization of white and black *racializes* whiteness, causing it to lose its normative functioning since whiteness exists as a “pure” category. But because whiteness stands as a negation of blackness, the minute it is equalized, whiteness vanishes, and the mixed

individual lapses into an existence polarized towards blackness. This “mixed” individual is understood as non-white and remains in the racial binary. Gordon suggests a more radical approach of overthrowing the normativity of whiteness. He suggests that humanity must experience a blackened world in order to overcome racism. This notion of a “blackened” world hints towards moral responsibility in an oppressive world. Through the rejection of whiteness and an abstract moral grounding in blackness, one can actively stand to destroy the foundation that advantages whiteness by causing a pressing need to respond to the sociopolitical implications of nonwhiteness. For Gordon, an emancipatory instance arises when a society is created in which there will be a more pressing need to attend to this racism.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Zack and Gordon’s Claims

From here, I will compare and critique both theorists’ claims. In comparison to Gordon, Zack’s more simplistic version of the racial binary system neglects to include the way race functions in terms of the visual coloring of a person. Her focus appears to be on legalistic classificatory conventions rather than what varying degrees of skin color mean to a society infused with the principles that Gordon highlights as setting the conditions for antiblack racism. If we are concerned with a critical mixed race theory that works to solve the problem of racism, there must be at least an understanding of the hierarchical functioning of skin color and the implications a mixed race designation would include.

Since Zack’s binary oversimplifies, her theory of mixed race is similarly one-dimensional. She posits that mixed race will function as “racelessness” and thus, antirace, but what Zack fails to acknowledge is the way racelessness currently functions in society. As Gordon’s principles of binary racial logic demonstrate, if white stands on top of the value scheme of a society, whiteness is the standard of comparison. If whiteness exists as that which everything is compared against, race then functions below this sphere of normativity.

Zack states, “An American who identifies herself as mixed black and white race is a new person racially, because old racial categories do not allow her to identify herself this way.”⁷ But the claim that one’s “newness racially” provides the choice of racelessness does not account for the way racelessness already functions in society, bringing Zack’s binary logic back into question.

In reference to an earlier quote by Gordon, “...a critical discussion of mixed-race categories calls for an understanding of how binary logic functions in discourses on race and racism. Without binaries, no racism will exist.”⁸ If the primary obligation to eliminating racism is eliminating the binary, a useful mixed race understanding must account for this. A mixed-race identity does not work outside Zack’s oversimplified binary—for the very essence of calling oneself “mixed” depends upon the black and white identities created by the binary system. Even if it seeks to act as a transgression of the binary, it relocates racial categories rather than separating from them. Calling oneself “mixed” stunts the development of a more practical and radical way to address the issue of

5. Ibid: 59

6. Ibid: 67

7. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994): 164

8. Lewis Gordon, *Her Majesty’s Other Children* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997)



racism from a mixed race standpoint.

Gordon's critique offers a deeper analysis of mixed race and racism. He acknowledges that simply identifying as mixed race does not sufficiently address racism since it does not directly attack the root causes of racism. The problem is the racial binary and its dependence on power hierarchies.

Gordon's advocacy of a "blackening" or "coloring" of the world is shown as a way to promote the urgency of response to racism. This would force a shift in focus away from binary logic, its racist foundation, and white normative logic. I contend that focusing on the *visual* aspects of persons of mixed race will offer a similar need to shift the binary's focus. "Mixing" the world (having more visually mixed persons) would require deconstruction of the binary by disrupting the established relational hierarchy of visual whiteness and blackness.

Both theorists' concentration on the self-identification of race asks whether reliance on the individual to claim mixed-race or engage in blackening the world may be too weak to solve a highly relational problem. Looking solely at the self-identification angle of mixed race neglects the benefits to the social world of individuals appearing mixed race in terms of their epidermal or morphological schema. It is my contention that there is the visual element of mixed race that will bring about a critical mixed-race theory focused on eliminating racism.

The Visually Mixed Race Individual

Since racist laws are no longer explicitly coded, the struggle against racism is to alter attitudes and beliefs. Direct action may be difficult and thus dialogue is crucial as

a method to bring people's attitudes and perceptions to the forefront. It is my belief that focus on the mixed race individual and healthy interracial relations offers a unique possibility to directly deal with issues of de facto, opposed to historically coded racism.

The very existence of a mixed individual can spark discussion. The visual transgression of the racial binary actively creates confusion. This confusion has the power to actively debunk notions of firm racial binary logic. Our immediate categorizations based on epidermal schema fall into either white or black. With the mixed-race individual, curiosity arises. As the "one-drop" rule fades from cultural understanding, new ways of conceptualizing race emerge. It is important to recognize the mixed individual as one who visibly transgresses the established binary racial distinction, but the solution is not to simply add a new category. The "mixed race" label does little to advance discussion. By merely adding another category, the foundation of logic which promotes racism, (1) to be white and (2) to not be black, is not destroyed but rather set aside in order to incorporate yet another distinction between individuals. This limits opportunity to radically address the racial binary. If racism is socially constructed, how does an individual asserting herself as "mixed race" fundamentally confront racism in any way? Perhaps a turn should be had in looking at the societal level—what would a truly "raceless" or "colorblind" nation look like? Should colorblindness even be the ideal political future? One would have to be *physically* blind not to see variance in skin tone. Race should not be an "identity" in terms of its self-ascription, but a means of identification in terms of physical characteristics. Therefore a person would not *be* white but simply have light

skin. I would argue that with a social climate that encouraged interracial relations which in turn fostered an environment of mixed individuals, physical descriptions of race would not fall into a type of "colorblindness" (wherein one did not "see" color) but rather a space where one could quite *visibly* see a spectrum of color and skin tone to the point where categorizations of individuals based on this factor would have no purpose or logic.

It could be said, however, that *group* diversity is an important factor of society and the reduction of such group categorizations to the individual level—such that they no longer have purpose—neglects both the sociocultural as well as in some ways, the biological significance of social grouping. As Lucius Outlaw states,

Why argue for the conservation of races?—"I do so because I am *thoroughly* convinced that a rich diversity of social and cultural life-world-making, decent (breeding) populations *are crucial to human species-being*. Both the human biological genome and our various cultural genomes, if you will, are enriched by *population*-group diversity as well as biological and cultural individuality, and the prospects for human survivability and adaptability enhanced accordingly.⁹

While social groupings within a larger society are important and indeed necessary, I am not in agreement that they need to or even *should* come through our ideas of race and racial identity. Also, with technology and our ability to move about the world quickly and connect with those who might be deemed "cultural others," social groupings and biological groupings based on geography are becoming less and less exclusive.

Outlaw would also state that the racial binary or simply having what we understand as two distinct races is not in and of itself conducive to racism.¹⁰ However, this vision is only the case from a neutral or removed perspective—one we can never fully grasp. It is an unfortunate fact that we live in a society that continues to oppress individuals through everyday social interactions and political institutions and we, as individuals, are shaped by these interactions. The racial binary's foundation lies within these racist interactions. The binary and its logic go hand in hand here; we cannot neatly separate its functioning from the logic that upholds it. Therefore, through analysis of the logic that sustains the binary, we can conceive of anti-racist practices that work to disrupt this logic by disrupting the binary itself.

Interracial Relations and Individual Racial Identity

As stated, perhaps what is needed to address the issue of racism is not more people *identifying* as mixed race, but more individuals who are visually incoherent with established black/white binaries. In order for this to occur, it would follow that interracial relations would have to be strengthened to provide for a social climate that encouraged and supported these relations, but this appears as a kind of "catch-22." It seems that healthy interracial relations and thus the creation of more individuals of visibly mixed race would not occur without first getting rid of racism. However, if we were to approach racism as a social construction coded by binary

9. Lucius Outlaw, *Critical Social Theory in the Interests of Black Folks* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 182

10. Ibid: 159



racial logic, perhaps a dynamic change in the social context would simultaneously include both internal and external changes in terms of interracial relations and mixed-race individuals. Approaching the issue from the individual level and the societal level could blur the distinction between cause and effect in terms of how to eradicate racism. Internal changes would address attitudes about interactions between races while external changes to our environment would involve visual opposition to the black/white dichotomy and individuals who did not label themselves with the *firm* distinction of “mixed race” but rather, as a great matter of their existence, stood as an opportunity for discourses on and deconstruction of binary racial analysis to occur.

Use of both formal programs as well as self-motivated actions can be used to facilitate more contact and interaction between differently raced peoples. Practical engagement in issues of race are crucial in addressing the way racism currently functions in our nation. Using this theoretical approach to mixed race posits the visually mixed race individual as a locus of social change. Conceivably, anyone can actively place himself in the position to be a locus of positive social change, but what is specifically awarded to the visibly mixed race individual is the passive means of inciting confusion and questioning amongst others in the social world, regardless of the mixed individual’s active stance.

With a concentration on the visual appeal, Zack and Gordon’s analyses can be combined to further theorize mixed race and racism. I concede that mixed race identity is going to occur because of one’s need to self-define. It is not my belief that one should actively avoid publicly announcing a mixed racial makeup, but such designations must

know of their ability to essentialize an individual or groups of individuals. In that respect, I find it necessary to go beyond asserting oneself as mixed race. To say that mixed race identity stands as the “antirace” neglects the social sphere and sociopolitical implications. Gordon more functionally approaches the racial binary, positing it as more of a sliding scale hierarchy where the break occurs between whiteness and all else (non-whiteness). Therefore, when one self defines amidst a social world, a sense of allegiance is declared and certain social and political implications develop. This conception of the racial binary incorporates mixed individuals’ position, and thus, Gordon concludes, mixed race identity cannot form a critical theory on eradicating racism, as it does not disrupt the current hierarchical binary logic of race. However, Gordon does not seem to consider the benefits *more* persons of visual mixed race would have in deconstructing the racial binary *today*, which relies heavily on the *visual* aspects of race. Perhaps incorporating Zack’s vision of an emancipatory mixed race theory and Gordon’s careful and reflective thought on the subject, a mixed race theory focused on the visual appeal of the mixed race individual, (rather than the public self-identification aspect) compounded with encouraging a healthy space for the creation of more mixed race individuals, will form a line of thought focused on abolishing racism.

Conclusion

Visual transgression of the racial binary can work in a powerful way, both on the individual level as well as the societal. The mixed individual has the power to incite confusion, especially if a term such as “mixed race” is used

to open channels of discourse rather than stand as a closed topic of classificatory convenience. In that sense, it is important that a term such as “mixed race” not become solidified in discourses on race. This creates space for new ways of conceptualizing race and discredits the racial binary. But what about the claim that mixed race is already included in this binary logic? With the slow death of the “one-drop rule,” the binary has shifted and become fairly more fluid, though a firm distinction between white and non-white remains. The power mixed race has on affecting this type of binary comes on a more massive

scale. Similar to Gordon’s idea of “blackening”, increased numbers of visually mixed people creates a pressing need to attend to racism in its anticolored forms while questioning the binary by visibly overcoming the logic that supports it.

The very “newness” of a mixed race identity allows an opportunity for large-scale societal critique on race itself and the structures that uphold binary racial logic. Therefore, through not only theoretical inquiries, but also practical engagement with the topic of mixed race, there exists a key outlet for addressing the problem of racism that cannot be ignored. ♦

