

RACE REMIXED

# Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Choose All of the Above



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

From left: Shannon Palmer, Japanese/Irish; Vasco Mateus, Portuguese/African-American/Haitian; Laura Wood, Black/White. [More Photos](#) »

By SUSAN SAULNY  
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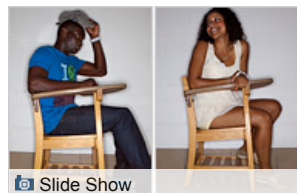
COLLEGE PARK, Md. — In another time or place, the game of “What Are You?” that was played one night last fall at the [University of Maryland](#) might have been mean, or menacing: Laura Wood’s peers were picking apart her every feature in an effort to guess her race.

## Race Remixed

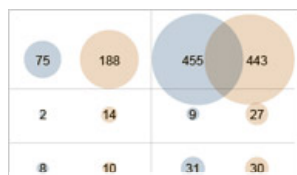
*A New Sense of Identity*

Articles in this series will explore the growing number of mixed-race Americans.

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Rejecting the Color Lines



“How many mixtures do you have?” one young man asked above the chatter of about 50 students. With her tan skin and curly brown hair, Ms. Wood’s ancestry could have spanned the globe.

“I’m mixed with two things,” she said politely.

“Are you mulatto?” asked Paul Skym, another student, using a word once tinged with shame that is enjoying a comeback in some young circles. When Ms. Wood confirmed that she is indeed black and white, Mr. Skym, who is Asian and white, boasted, “Now that’s what I’m talking about!” in affirmation of their mutual mixed lineage.

Then the group of friends — formally, the [Multiracial and Biracial Student Association](#) — erupted into laughter and cheers, a routine show of their mixed-race pride.

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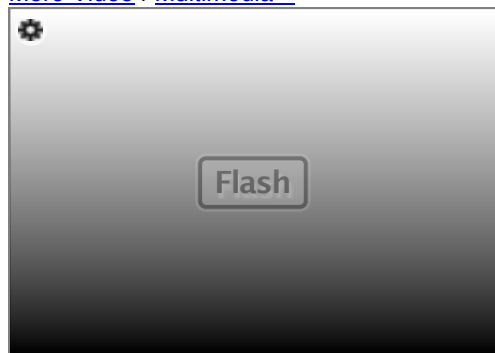
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Who Is Marrying Whom

The crop of students moving through college right now includes the largest group of mixed-race people ever to come of age in the United States, and they are only the vanguard: the country is in the midst of a demographic shift driven by [immigration](#) and intermarriage.

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## Young and Mixed in

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One in seven new [marriages](#) is between spouses of different races or ethnicities, according to data from 2008 and 2009 that was analyzed by the [Pew Research Center](#). Multiracial and multiethnic Americans (usually grouped together as “mixed race”) are one of the country’s fastest-growing demographic groups. And experts expect the racial results of the 2010 census, which will start to be released next month, to show the trend continuing or accelerating.

Many young adults of mixed backgrounds are rejecting the color lines that have defined Americans for generations in favor of a much more fluid sense of identity. Ask Michelle López-Mullins, a 20-year-old junior and the president of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association, how she marks her race on forms like the census, and she says, “It depends on the day, and it depends on the options.”

They are also using the strength in their growing numbers to affirm roots that were once portrayed as tragic or pitiable.

“I think it’s really important to acknowledge who you are and everything that makes you that,” said Ms. Wood, the 19-year-old vice president of the group. “If someone tries to call me black I say, ‘yes — and white.’ People have the right not to acknowledge everything, but don’t do it because society tells you that you can’t.”

No one knows quite how the growth of the multiracial population will change the country. Optimists say the blending of the races is a step toward transcending race, to a place where America is free of bigotry, prejudice and programs like affirmative action.

Pessimists say that a more powerful multiracial movement will lead to more stratification and come at the expense of the number and influence of other minority groups, particularly African-Americans.

And some sociologists say that grouping all multiracial people together glosses over differences in circumstances between someone who is, say, black and Latino, and someone who is Asian and white. (Among interracial couples, white-Asian pairings tend to be better educated and have higher incomes, according to [Reynolds Farley](#), a professor emeritus at the [University of Michigan](#).)

Along those lines, it is telling that the rates of intermarriage are lowest between blacks and whites, indicative of the enduring economic and social distance between them.

Prof. Rainier Spencer, director of the Afro-American Studies Program at the [University of Nevada](#), Las Vegas, and the author of “[Reproducing Race: The Paradox of Generation Mix](#),” says he believes that there is too much “emotional investment” in the notion of multiracialism as a panacea for the nation’s age-old divisions. “The mixed-race identity is not a transcendence of race, it’s a new tribe,” he said. “A new Balkanization of race.”



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But for many of the [University of Maryland](#) students, that is not the point. They are asserting their freedom to identify as they choose.

“All society is trying to tear you apart and make you pick a side,” Ms. Wood said. “I want us to have a say.”

### **The Way We Were**

Americans mostly think of themselves in singular racial terms. Witness [President Obama's answer to the race question](#) on the 2010 census: Although his mother was white and his father was black, Mr. Obama checked only one box, black, even though he could have checked both races.

Some proportion of the country's population has been mixed-race since the first white settlers had children with Native Americans. What has changed is how mixed-race Americans are defined and counted.

Long ago, the nation saw itself in more hues than black and white: the 1890 census included categories for racial mixtures such as quadroon (one-fourth black) and octoroon (one-eighth black). With the exception of one survey from 1850 to 1920, the census included a mulatto category, which was for people who had any perceptible trace of African blood.

But by the 1930 census, terms for mixed-race people had all disappeared, replaced by the so-called one-drop rule, an antebellum convention that held that anyone with a trace of African ancestry was only black. (Similarly, people who were “white and Indian” were generally to be counted as Indian.)

It was the census enumerator who decided.

By the 1970s, Americans were expected to designate themselves as members of one officially recognized racial group: black, white, American Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean or “other,” an option used frequently by people of Hispanic origin. (The census recognizes Hispanic as an ethnicity, not a race.)

Starting with the 2000 census, Americans were allowed to mark one or more races.

The multiracial option came after years of complaints and lobbying, mostly by the white mothers of biracial children who objected to their children being allowed to check only one race. In 2000, seven million people — about 2.4 percent of the population — reported being more than one race.

According to estimates from the [Census Bureau](#), the mixed-race population has grown by roughly 35 percent since 2000.

And many researchers think the census and other surveys undercount the mixed population.

The 2010 mixed-race statistics will be released, state by state, over the first half of the year.

“There could be some big surprises,” said Jeffrey S. Passel, a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, meaning that the number of mixed-race Americans could be high. “There's not only less stigma to being in these groups, there's even positive cachet.”

### **Moving Forward**

The faces of mixed-race America are not just on college campuses. They are in politics, business and sports. And the ethnically ambiguous are especially ubiquitous in movies, television shows and advertising. There are news, social networking and dating Web sites focusing on the mixed-race audience, and even consumer products like [shampoo](#). There are mixed-race [film festivals](#) and conferences. And student groups like the one at Maryland, offering peer support and activism, are more common.

Such a club would not have existed a generation ago — when the question at the center of the “What Are You?” game would have been a provocation rather than an icebreaker.

“It’s kind of a taking-back in a way, taking the reins,” Ms. López-Mullins said. “We don’t always have to let it get us down,” she added, referring to the question multiracial people have heard for generations.

“The No. 1 reason why we exist is to give people who feel like they don’t want to choose a side, that don’t want to label themselves based on other people’s interpretations of who they are, to give them a place, that safe space,” she said. Ms. López-Mullins is Chinese and Peruvian on one side, and white and American Indian on the other.

That safe space did not exist amid the neo-Classical style buildings of the campus when Warren Kelley enrolled in 1974. Though his mother is Japanese and his father is African-American, he had basically one choice when it came to his racial identity. “I was black and proud to be black,” Dr. Kelley said. “There was no notion that I might be multiracial. Or that the public discourse on college campuses recognized the multiracial community.”

Almost 40 years later, Dr. Kelley is the assistant vice president for student affairs at the university and faculty adviser to the multiracial club, and he is often in awe of the change on this campus.

When the multiracial group was founded in 2002, Dr. Kelley said, “There was an instant audience.”

They did not just want to hold parties. The group sponsored an annual weeklong program of discussions intended to raise awareness of multiracial identities — called Mixed Madness — and conceived a new class on the experience of mixed-race Asian-Americans that was made part of the curriculum last year.

“Even if someone had formed a mixed-race group in the ’70s, would I have joined?” Dr. Kelley said. “I don’t know. My multiracial identity wasn’t prominent at the time. I don’t think I even conceptualized the idea.”

By the 2000 census, Dr. Kelley’s notion of his racial identity had evolved to include his mother’s Asian heritage; he modified his race officially on the form. After a lifetime of checking black, he checked Asian and black.

(Dr. Kelley’s mother was born in Kyoto. She met her future husband, a black soldier from Alabama, while he was serving in the Pacific during World War II.)

Checking both races was not an easy choice, Dr. Kelley said, “as a black man, with all that means in terms of pride in that heritage as well as reasons to give back and be part of progress forward.”

“As I moved into adulthood and got a professional job, I started to respect my parents more and see the amount of my mom’s culture that’s reflected in me,” he said. “Society itself also moved.”

### **Finding Camaraderie**

In fall 2009, a question tugged at Sabrina Garcia, then a freshman at Maryland, a public university with 26,500 undergraduates: “Where will I fit in?” recalled Ms. Garcia, who is [Palestinian](#) and Salvadoran.

“I considered the Latina student union, but I’m only half,” she said. “I didn’t want to feel like I was hiding any part of me. I went to an M.B.S.A. meeting and it was really great. I really feel like part of a group that understands.”

The group holds weekly meetings, in addition to hosting movie nights, dinners, parties and, occasionally, posts broadcasts on [YouTube](#).

Not all of its 100 or so members consider themselves mixed race, and the club welcomes everyone.

At a meeting in the fall, David Banda, who is Hispanic, and Julicia Coleman, who is black, came just to unwind among supportive listeners. They discussed the frustrations of being an interracial couple, even today, especially back in their hometown, Upper Marlboro, Md.

“When we go back home, let’s say for a weekend or to the mall, they see us walking and I get this look, you know, sort of giving me the idea: ‘Why are you with her? You’re not black, so she should be with a black person.’ Or comments,” Mr. Banda, 20, said at a meeting of the group. “Even some of my friends tell me, ‘Why don’t you date a Hispanic girl?’ ”

Mr. Banda and Ms. Coleman are thinking about having children someday. “One of the main reasons I joined is to see the struggles mixed people go through,” he said, “so we can be prepared when that time comes.”

And despite the growth of the mixed-race population, there are struggles.

Ian Winchester, a junior who is part Ghanaian, part Scottish-Norwegian, said he felt lucky and torn being biracial. His Scottish grandfather was keen on dressing him in kilts as a boy. The other side of the family would put him in a dashiki. “I do feel empowered being biracial,” he said. “The ability to question your identity — identity in general — is really a gift.”

But, he continued, “I don’t even like to identify myself as a race anymore. My family has been pulling me in two directions about what I am. I just want to be a person.”

Similarly, Ms. López-Mullins sees herself largely in nonracial terms.

“I hadn’t even learned the word ‘Hispanic’ until I came home from school one day and asked my dad what I should refer to him as, to express what I am,” she said. “Growing up with my parents, I never thought we were different from any other family.”

But it was not long before Ms. López-Mullins came to detest what was the most common question put to her in grade school, even from friends. “What are you?” they asked, and “Where are you from?” They were fascinated by her father, a Latino with Asian roots, and her mother with the long blond hair, who was mostly European in ancestry, although mixed with some Cherokee and Shawnee.

“I was always having to explain where my parents are from because just saying ‘I’m from Takoma Park, Maryland,’ was not enough,” she said. “Saying ‘I’m an American’ wasn’t enough.”

“Now when people ask what I am, I say, ‘How much time do you have?’ ” she said. “Race will not automatically tell you my story.”

What box does she check on forms like the census? “Hispanic, white, Asian American, Native American,” she said. “I’m pretty much checking everything.”

At one meeting of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association, Ms. Wood shared a story about surprises and coming to terms with them. “Until I was 8 years old, I thought I was white,” she told the group. “My mother and aunt sat me down and said the guy I’d been calling Dad was not my father. I started crying. And she said, ‘Your real father is black.’ ”

Ms. Wood’s mother, Catherine Bandele, who is white, and her biological father split up before she was born. Facing economic troubles and resistance from her family about raising a mixed-race child, Ms. Bandele gave her daughter up for adoption to a couple who had requested a biracial baby. But after two weeks, she changed her mind. “I had to fight to get her back, but I got her,” Ms. Bandele said. “And we’re so proud of Laura.”

Eventually Ms. Wood’s closest relatives softened, embracing her.

But more distant relatives never came around. “They can’t see past the color of my skin and accept me even though I share DNA with them,” she said. “It hurts a lot because I don’t even know my father’s side of the family.”

Ms. Wood has searched the Internet for her father, to no avail.

“Being in M.B.S.A., it really helps with that,” she said. “Finding a group of people who can accept you for who you are and being able to accept yourself, to just be able to look in the mirror and say, ‘I’m O.K. just the way I am!’ — honestly, I feel that it’s a blessing.”

“It took a long time,” she said.

Now Ms. Wood is one of the group’s foremost advocates.

Over dinner with Ms. López-Mullins one night, she wondered: “What if Obama had checked white? There would have been an uproar because he’s the first ‘black president,’ even though he’s mixed. I would like to have a conversation with him about why he did that.”

Absent that opportunity, Ms. Wood took her concerns about what Mr. Obama checked to a meeting of the campus chapter of the [N.A.A.C.P.](#) last year. Vicky Key, a past president of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association, who is Greek and black, joined her. The question for discussion was whether Mr. Obama is the first black president or the first multiracial president.

Ms. Key, a senior, remembered someone answering the question without much discussion: “One-drop rule, he’s black.”

“But we were like, ‘Wait!’ ” she said. “That’s offensive to us. We sat there and tried to advocate, but they said, ‘No, he’s black and that’s it.’ Then someone said, ‘Stop taking away our black president.’ I didn’t understand where they were coming from, and they didn’t understand me.”





Whether Mr. Obama is considered black or multiracial, there is a wider debate among mixed-race people about what the long-term goals of their advocacy should be, both on campus and off.

“I don’t want a color-blind society at all,” Ms. Wood said. “I just want both my races to be acknowledged.”

Ms. López-Mullins countered, “I want mine not to matter.”

A version of this article appeared in print on January 30, 2011, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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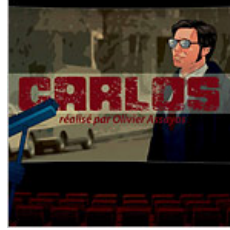
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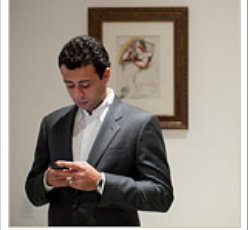
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