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Mixed-race thought – making and unmaking (mixed) race

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Abstract

Across the globe, racial and ethnic categories continue to play a central role in the regulation and organisation of social and political life. Mixed-race in all its forms requires us to move beyond categorical thinking and question epistemological and methodological singularities. Andrew Sanchez's development of 'mixed race thought' (MRT) suggests a pluralist theory and methodology with radical potential. The papers here take a critical approach to untangling the complex, sometimes contradictory, always shifting temporal geo-political foundations of 'mixed race' and the diverse ways they manifest in practice. Using queer of colour, feminist, de- and postcolonial thinking I argue that we cannot disregard the gendered, sexualised dynamics of race-making and its impact on contemporary boundary making and identities. I draw on three interrelated themes: embodiment, experience and dis/identification and their co-constitution to argue that understanding processes of identification provide a lens for dismantling racism.

Keywords

mixed race, queer feminist, decolonial, embodiment, experience, identification, methodologies

This special issue of *Critique of Anthropology* emerges from a workshop held at the University of Cambridge in July 2023. The workshop was organised by Andrew Sanchez, and in the introduction, he describes the reasons for the workshop and the form it took. I regret that I was unable to attend what was clearly an extremely productive space, as evidenced by the articles collected here. In this afterword I consider some of the possibilities for Mixed-Race Thought (MRT) through a discussion of the concept itself, its

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implications for theory and research in practice, and the articles which explore mixed race in diverse contexts.

Working with 'mixed race', as with all academic endeavours, cannot be undertaken in isolation. My experience in higher education has been profoundly influenced by feminist pedagogies as epistemic communities of practice.[1] These spaces work best if they are dynamic and interactive, and they can 'become a critical lifeline for surviving and thinking through power relations between knowers and the ecosystem that shapes the construction of knowledge' (Okech, 2020: 314).

When I began my PhD thesis on mixed-race identification in 1996, 'Mixed Race Studies' was taking shape in the global North. Intellectual sharing was international, through email correspondence and in-person through workshops, seminars, ideas generation, research bids and collaborative writing. At that time, many of us were motivated by our experiences of being 'Other', and the limits of racial and ethnic thinking on community and identity. Often, we were in dialogue with global histories of miscegenation, hybridity and 'mixedness'. In one sense, the questions we had and theories we drew on remain the same. For mixed-race scholarship – as with all race thinking – there is no *inevitable* destabilisation of the idea of race, nor progressive politics of anti-racism; some mixed-race organisations have gone so far as to suggest that mixed-race people are 'better' than 'monoracial' in a number of areas (Ali, 2012).[2] Most significantly, race is often an important part of people's identities.

There is no shared politics, language or conceptual framework for race, indeed it does not exist as a meaningful category in many places. This can make productive dialogue difficult. The need for translation to make sense of mixed race in theory and practice requires us to exchange and be critical of knowledge making. The contributions to this special issue show the benefits to this approach by untangling the complex, sometimes contradictory, always shifting temporal geo-political foundations of 'mixed race' and the diverse ways it manifests in practice. The idea that 'race mixing' is 'bad' continues to influence the regulation of populations; the reification of race is still a thorny issue, and potentials and pitfalls of mixed-race positionality underpin a lot of academic and community politics and research. The articles here grapple with situated constructions of racial categorisations and their un/doing through mixed race.

Sanchez (2025, this volume) argues that Mixed-Race Thought (MRT) can provide an antidote to the continued salience of petrified racial categories which undergird racial injustices. For many, these categories do the work of fixing and homogenising 'racial groups' while for others, on closer examination, they demonstrate the instability and contingency of ideas of race. Writing against a biological definition of race, Stuart Hall described race as a 'floating signifier; an unstable, inessential discursive formation. However, he emphasises the power of this shifting discourse in justifying 'the brute facts of human history, which after all have disfigured the lives, and crippled and constrained the potentialities of literally millions of the world's dispossessed.' (Hall, 1997: 9). Critical race scholars continue to navigate 'the illusion of race' (Appiah, 1985); not 'real' but lived, claimed and fought over by many. Such tension is particularly fraught for scholars of mixed race, yet it is also the reason why exploring this concept is so important to the job of dismantling racial hierarchies.

Racial categorisation practices have long histories, and all the papers discuss the ways in which race has been made in direct relation to coloniality and wealth accumulation. These relations of power have only intensified under the conditions of contemporary hypercapitalism.[3] Racialisations may be complex but according to Fredrickson (2002: 9) they have a very simple formula at heart. For him and other scholars of race and ethnicity, it is racism that produces race, thus, he argues that difference + power = racism. It is the power to produce and maintain differences that allows racism to flourish in the form of race. The contributors explore the processes which re/produce categories that are both racialised and racialising, and, in questioning racial epistemologies and raciologies, they necessarily chart relationships between past, present and future.

European colonial racialising epistemologies were made through bodies. Racial classification processes created and hierarchised human and non-human animals. European Enlightenment philosophers and 'physical anthropologists' led the development of the science of race and demarcated 'civilised' and 'savage' peoples (e.g. Stepan, 1982). They formulated bodily attributes and characteristics such as resilience to disease in order to racialise intellect, emotion, temperament, sexualities and art. Darwinian theories of sex selection justified the control of hetero/sex and reproduction (see e.g. Bernasconi and Lott, 2000; Bindman, 2002). Thus the 'modern invention' of race required the regulation of racialised and classed sexualities.

This process of digging into the colonial foundations of race thinking reveals the continued salience of race as biology. These ideas are dehumanising and can be deadly. A recent report on health inequalities in England found 'racial disparities' in the number of investigations into the deaths of Black women during pregnancy and birth, and babies from before to just after birth. The investigations reflect the higher numbers of these deaths (Thomas, 2024). Black women are stereotyped as being able to withstand pain and/or conversely 'hysterical' and making a fuss, and both result in failure to treat them. Researchers exposed 'personal bias' and 'institutionalised racism' in decision making, irrespective of class or prior health.

The authors of the articles in this special issue ask fundamental questions which connect to wider areas of enquiry. How and why do ideas of race change over time and by place? How are they embedded within structures of power within and across diverse cultural and ethno-national sites? How do other kinds of social difference co-produce, inhabit and animate them? What can MRT do to unsettle racial/ising knowledge? Attempts to answer these questions often invite interdisciplinary thinking. In his introduction, Sanchez (2025, this volume) notes that he incorporated queer theory into the development of MRT and provides a good example of how interdisciplinarity can be highly generative. But some of the debates on knowledge politics within differing strands of critical social and cultural scholarship are somewhat inimical. Asher and Ramamurthy (2020: 542), for example, refuse the oft-cited distinctions between postcolonial theory, decolonial theory and settler-colonial theory, instead proposing a shared 'anticolonial' scholarship which could be mutually enriching to all three. Conversely, the 'sudden interest in decolonization' is articulated by trans* scholar activists in terms of the colonising effects of northern gender, sexualities and queer theory, and how it became 'chic' to explore 'intersectionality and disability studies (crip theory)' without needing to

develop a substantive politics to benefit the 'objects' of study (Cotten in Boellsdorff et al., 2014: 422).[4]

'Queering' seems to be on the rise again, and for me the persistent erasure of gender and sexualities, and critical anticolonial politics, when using queer theory is troubling. Of course, not all queer scholars would agree with me and Sanchez is thoughtful and precise in his own dialogue between queer theory and others. This collection demonstrates how interdisciplinarity, MRT and critical positionality might unfix categorisation, and/or contribute to the end of race.[5] The authors grapple with the enduring question of whether mixed race, halfie, hafu, biracial, etc. still reproduce and potentially even reinforce essentialist understandings of race, ethnicity and culture. Changing and diversifying terminologies does little to interrupt discourses that buttress the organisation of power which maintain the status quo. The authors choose to focus on the dynamic, generative and disruptive possibilities of 'mixed race'. Indeed MRT can be an analytical tool which inspires imaginative encounters with ways of being and knowing.

There is a broad academic consensus in social sciences that individual and collective meaning-making are shaped through diverse epistemological frames.[6] The contributors deploy a range of 'subjective' qualitative methodologies to explore the synthesis of theories of knowing and being best described as 'onto-epistemologies'.[7] Memoirs, diaries and autobiographies have long been important to understanding racial epistemologies and the 'autobiographical turn' in academic spaces such as feminist cultural studies required a critical analysis of the shaping of 'individual' and 'private' lives within and by wider socio-political contestations (e.g. Cosslett et al., 2000). As an undergraduate, I was lucky enough to be required to read women's life histories and biographical fiction from around the world, since which narrative, embodied and sensory elements of identification have underpinned my own research. This probably explains why I have chosen the following three themes for comment: embodiment, experience and identity. While I believe these are foundational to the articles there are of course many other elements them that are equally as important and fascinating.

Embodiment

With racialised, gendered bodies at the heart of colonial and imperial encounters it follows that it was necessary to police sex itself in order to counter moral and physical degeneracy. However, sexual relations between colonisers and 'natives' were not the sole focus of this particular regulation and oversight. What becomes more important is the reproductive body and the role of reproduction in nation building, which is filtered through the concept of class or its location-specific equivalent. For example, in England in the early 20th century, the socialist Fabian Society promoted 'positive eugenics' to strengthen the stock in liberal democracies (Redvaldsen, 2017). They argued that some members of society should be encouraged to reproduce while others should be prohibited. This strategy was to protect racial purity and prevent the dilution and contamination of the nation. Conversely, miscegenation was used as a strategy for assimilation to strengthen national populations and create a collective sense of belonging. The Victorian discourse of 'hybrid vigour', utilised in plant and animal husbandry, travelled to racial and ethnic mixing and the pros

and cons of 'admixture'. As such, for many social scientists the concept of hybridity is a heavily loaded term which is fundamentally about improving stock. However, the articles presented here use the term 'hybrid' in relation to ethnicity and culture rather than 'race', deploying it as a positive and productive concept. In the USA this can be explored through the 'what are you?' question. In Latin America, cultural hybridity as in *mestizaje* can be deciphered through phenotypical bodily clues such has hair and skin colour, but is often read alongside a combination of cultural markers, such as clothes and ornaments.

Mixed race is sometimes still understood as miscegenation, and bodies shape knowledges of self and others, therefore researching the lived experience of embodiment provides a way to access them. Not only does this challenge metrics of identity, but embodied methods also increasingly supplement or replace other qualitative methods. Feminist, crip, trans* and de- and postcolonial thinkers have drawn on their own experiences of embodiment to generate theory and conduct research, and sociological and cultural studies recognise the creative potentials of tacit and affective methodologies (Spatz, 2017). Thanem and Knights (2019) reject the separation of flesh and reason, and recognise that the matter of bodies cannot be separated from their ethnocultural situatedness. The materiality of bodies is inconstant across a lifetime and is contingent on emplacement; affect and emotion are differently shaped by cultural norms, and this has always been particularly significant for mixed-race individuals. The authors demonstrate the ways bodies have been seen as illegitimate and illegible or valorised and desired. Using their own and others' embodied narratives they unravel some of the ways in which 'Mixed-Race Thought' is lived and how it undoes racial categorisation. For example, mixed race in the archives is about bodies if not embodiment; the lack of distinction between 'brown' people in the Dutch academy indicates mixedness as well as monoraciality, experienced as both distinct and similar. Indeterminant embodiment shapes experience. Often it is our somatic experience, when seen through the eyes of another, that informs narrative research on mixing.

Experience

In her influential article entitled 'The evidence of experience' the feminist historian Joan Scott writes 'It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience' (1991: 779). She argues that:

> Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. (1991: 779)

The authors in this volume use MRT to investigate historical legacies, and their subsequent transformations or re-imaginings continue to shape mixed race in diverse contexts. This is a delicate task. Uncritical acceptance of the 'authority of experience' is as problematic as the onto-epistemic violence done to self and others when experience is denied or distorted. This balancing act and its attendant ethical responsibilities are skilfully handled and are highly generative to all the articles. The critical approach to the

auto/ethnographies reveals some of the inner workings and logics Scott refers to. Anti-normative approaches to meaning-making are shaped by critical reflexivity.

One theme that is repeated across the collection is this diachronic approach to temporal organisation and the influence of social mobility. Migration whether intra- or internationally provides a rich strand of data. Dis- and trans-locational experiences can give rise to immediate shifts in positionality. The dissonances of the mixed-race category are made clear when bodies are made anew through novel interpretive frameworks. Again, while this is can be understood as a result of embodiment as mattering, the articles also show how bodies are disciplined and displayed through diverse cultural practices. New kinds of categorisation by others can lead to misrecognition or rejection, yet this can provide a positive and generative response regardless of such experiences being painful. Refusals and resistances can be powerful drivers of meaning-making.

Experiences of travel can also mean that there is a cut with 'heritage' and a rupturing of kin relations and familial identification. The way in which, for example, language can be mobilised as a marker of authenticity can be undermined by lack or failure to speak (see Antohin, 2025, this volume). Under some circumstances it can be a form of resistance. Ien Ang (2001) draws on her experiences of not speaking (or 'feeling') Chinese in her experiences of being Other in the different locations in which she has lived (including Indonesia, the Netherlands and Australia). Whether difficult or not, her experience of movement has shaped her argument against thinking within West–East binaries, and on the need to focus on togetherness rather than difference in response to overdetermined understandings of identity.

Embodiment as lived, bodies as experienced and contested, and the ways in which embodiment and bodies can be transmuted through cultural practices such as language use are foundational to identity and subjectivity. The theme of experience also informs the next section which goes into more detail about the relationships between identities, subjectivities and racial positionalities.

Disidentification and subjectivation

Stuart Hall argues that understanding the processes by which identities are formed necessitates consideration of both the discursive shaping of identity and the internal processes of subjectivity. He argues that this requires us to 'suture' the psychic and the social and to recognise that identities are never fully achieved. Following Foucault, he suggests that subjects are made by but also resist discursive formations (Hall, 2011: 2).

This destabilisation of identity can be understood through bordering and 'frontier-effects':

> Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of *identification and attachment* only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected. *Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more.* The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'. (Hall, 2011: 5, first and third emphases added)

Such an approach seems particularly important to mixed-race positionalities and the ways in which power and politics are negotiated in the relationality of identity. Through the discussions of migration, for example, the practical effects of the boundary changes and impact on recognition are acutely evident. An analysis of the archival diaries of anthropologists who recorded 'the vernacular practices of differentiation and identification' (López Caballero, 2025, this volume) demonstrated the porosity of racial categories, an unfinished form of identification that comes from observational practices of an/Other. The authors' contributions demonstrate how ideologies are subverted in practice, how they fail to interpellate the subject, and how that failure demonstrates the agency of subjects.

Negotiating a politics of refusal, feminist, indigenous, Queer and QOC theorists have taken up what José Muñoz (1999) calls 'disidentification'. Disidentification is a resistance to normative categories, not evading or transforming them wholesale, but subverting them through recognition and reform. Muñoz, an artist, skilfully merges practices which are imaginative and generative.

Identification as 'points of attachment' can also help us to see why and how the contributors have been motivated to analyse the doing and being of mixed race and how and why it shapes both them and their interlocutors. To do so we are forced to question how we utilise a term like 'misrecognition'. Is there some truth to the body that is being misrecognised? Exploring 'being' in a space of indeterminacy, at the 'threshold of whiteness', in the borderlands or liminal spaces, informs the subjective experiences of all racial classification. And yet, I have – as have many others – fallen into the trap of saying 'My father is xx my mother is xx.' I mark these with xx as my own terminologies have shifted over time and in context. Despite a conscious political commitment to a feminist postcolonial, queer of colour approach to identification I have written that I have been incorrectly identified or misrecognised. In the past I have, for example, clarified 'I am not that, I am this'; 'I am not Mediterranean/Black/Arab etc., I am mixed race.' I have also been astounded when others can look at me and spot my Trinidadian heritage (whatever that means!) within a minute, often without speaking to me beforehand. Regardless of our own sense of multiple points of attachment, it is very easy to slide into these simple categorisations in our production of an outside or excess. Language, not thinking, fails us.

Likewise, we may consider the explanatory power of Bhabha's 'third space', a place that does not build on prior existing races, cultures and so on, but rather the third space gives rise to these prior positions (Bhabha, 1990). For Bhabha, all culture is always in a process of hybridity. Therefore, it is more appropriate to read bodies as symbolic thresholds which are 'materialised' over time, which can shift in relation to others, unsettling all the prior ways of knowing embodiment. For example, what can it mean to be 'Brown'? It can be a 'monoracial' or 'multiracial' label. In the UK it stands distinct from Black and is often preferred to the unhelpful 'minority ethnic'. The malleability of the body and its indeterminate position can be both valorised and scorned, sometimes simultaneously. In the Dutch institutional context, gendered Brownness is valued but thus something to be exploited. Likewise for Latin American sex workers it is 'exoticism' which can be exploited through a commodification of the self and by claiming a point of attachment to the exotic (Gutiérrez Garza, 2025, this volume). Lewis (2025, this volume)

asks probing questions of embodiment and knowledge by researching the histories of those who are Brown who have been accepted as the voices of Black Radical thinking. This conjures a fundamental question of epistemology framed by Alcoff (1991) as 'the problem of speaking for others'.

Many of the articles talk explicitly about embodied proximity to whiteness. This is partly because most of the articles refer to European colonisation and white/native mixing as political context for classification, and which also shapes 'minority mixes'.[8] In addition, psychoanalytic theorist Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (2000) argues that there is a widespread desire for whiteness, a signifier of immense power, which can be internalised yet not consciously recognised. However, as Gutiérrez Garza (2025, this volume) notes, there is also reversal in contemporary manifestations of mass culture seen in the controversies about appropriation of 'Other' cultures and of bodies themselves. This kind of ambivalence, the desire for and fear of the Other, is a key feature of writing on mixing.

Beyond somewhat mechanistic discussions of 'identity', we see that subject formation relies on more than linguistic representation, and epistemological insights are more varied, more nuanced and more labile, affording them more potential for political transformation than some more positivist approaches to social science. Working with those who have traditionally occupied the 'the margins' can illuminate the centre. The politics of location becomes central to teasing out the threads that, woven together, become MRT.

Categorical temporalities: Re/thinking mixed race to undo race

The discussion so far has taken a very small slice out of some shared themes found in this special issue. But it is neither possible nor desirable to consider any one of these as 'parts' that together make up a 'whole'. Although imbricated with each other, using embodiment, experience and identity-as-identification as categories of analysis offers opportunities to explore the possibility of the application of MRT to destabilise certain categorical techniques.

In this collection, I would argue that it is the temporal framing to the research and analyses that is the glue which holds them together. It has been argued that the 'container' of nations and nationalisms necessarily draws on both the past and future in the present. For the post- and de-colonial scholar, the relevance of the 'changing same' to contemporary politics is non-negotiable. At this political juncture the defence against contrived threats to national culture, borders and identities is deadly. The rise of populism around the globe is often fuelled by nostalgia for what has been lost and what must be restored for the future. Whatever the scale, ethnic and cultural 'traditions' are dynamic and evolve over time with an immediacy felt by all in contact with them. Regardless of methodological choices, all the contributors have engaged with these questions. Tracing diverse temporal modalities, as much as spatiality, is an indispensable part of auto-ethnography, archival and socio-legal research, cultural analysis and theoretical development.

The goal of critical social science is transformation; conceptual, individual, collective and, perhaps always, political. This of necessity troubles linear temporal narratives that run from past to future. Queer and QOC scholars argue that queer time is focused on futurity, finding ways to stretch conceptual relations of time with persons and politics. For Muñoz this work is based upon a utopian desire to escape the here and now into queer

futures (Muñoz, 2009). The imaginative aspects of this work are already apparent in indigenous concepts and practices of Dreaming. Dreaming can be part of conscious awareness but also surfaces from subconscious, liminal states, and through spaces of imagination, creativity and transformatory praxis (Tuhiwai Smith, 2022).[9] As Sanchez suggests, the dissonance felt by mixed-race subjects has been highly productive and I believe that researching mixed-race identities should not be limited to describing the identities themselves, nor is it only about narrativising subjectivities. Researching identity can and I believe should always examine processes of dis/identification – the when, where, how and why of identities. It can provide insights into to diverse forms of knowing and being, not only those framed through European Enlightenment and contemporaneous hegemonies of neoliberal individuals. This may be too much to ask of one analytical framework, but the contributors to the special issue show where the possibilities lie.

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Notes

1. I use the term 'feminist' in a loose way and 'defend a decolonial feminism whose objective is the destruction of racism, capitalism, and imperialism …' (Vergès, 2021: 5) using Queer of Colour (QOC) feminist postcolonial frameworks.
2. I am not suggesting that everyone shares my aim of undoing race, nor should they have to. I believe undoing race can simultaneously undo racism.
3. The devastating effects of colonial capital accumulation can be seen as responding to the needs of turbo capitalism. First coined by Luttwak (1999), the term 'hypercapitalism' is now used in a less technical way to indicate the power and speed of global capitalist expansion.
4. David Reimer was born male and was mutilated by a botched circumcision. He was raised as a girl but later decided to revert to his male identity. It has been suggested that this trauma contributed to his suicide. Judith Butler's use of David Reimer's life and suicide to develop the theory of performativity is pointedly described by Mauro Cabral as 'colonising' (Cabral in Boellsdorff et al., 2014: 423).

5. I am not suggesting that 'the end of race' should be the aim of the articles. I read them in this way and believe this could ultimately help disrupt the racist underpinnings to race.
6. See for example Erica Neeganagwedgin (2015) on indigenous identities and interconnectedness with community, land, cosmos and spirit; Sylvia Tamale (2020) on African 'ubuntu' philosophy, gender and sexualities, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2022) on methodologies.
7. Karen Barad (2007) discusses 'ethico-onto-epistemologies' in scientific practice and human interaction. My use of the term without 'ethico' is to emphasise that the internal work on the self as another can take place without ethical considerations.
8. There is of course a global literature on 'mixing', including from East Asian writers, Eastern European writers Australasian and so on. Here I focus on this collection and the authors' research into relations between white, Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples and their material, economic, cultural legacies.
9. I 'use' this concept with caution and am aware of the possibilities for reading this as another kind of intellectual tourism, where knowing otherwise is extracted from source and clumsily applied to completely different contexts. I respectfully reference it as a powerful counter to Eurocentric rationality and a source of profound inspiration.

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