Paragg, Jillian.

The JRC's Conference Proceedings series represents a selection of papers presented at the annual Graduate Religion Students Association Interdisciplinary Conference, hosted by Concordia University, Montréal, QC.

The JRC's Conference Proceedings series is a non-peer-reviewed publication. Content represents the prepared work of individual authors as presented on the day of the conference. As such, the following is considered a work-in-progress; please refrain from copying or distributing this paper.

This publication is available online thanks to the support of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec. Neither Concordia University nor its Faculty of Arts and Sciences is liable for any damages, costs, or losses whatsoever arising in any circumstances from these services.

© 2011 Jillian Paragg
AMBIVALENCE, NEGOTIATION AND THE EVERYDAY GAZE: EXPLORING MIXED RACE IDENTITY

JILLIAN PARAGG

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2010, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 19 young-adult women and men of mixed race in Edmonton, Alberta. A prominent theme that emerged in the everyday lives of my respondents was being asked the question ‘what are you?’ I position this ‘moment’ of being questioned as a manifestation of the external gaze. Such questioning demands an explanation, and is a gaze that ‘Others.’ Overall, the questioning demand reflects the limited and binary racialized landscape of the Canadian context: people of mixed race are “hypervisible” (Mahtani 2002: 429) to the external gaze, and are therefore subject to questioning, because they cross and challenge dominant racial binaries. They exceed the limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse and are therefore socially situated as ambivalent (Anzaldua 1987, 79; Taylor 2008, 94).

Within the literature on the ‘racial gaze,’ the gaze is often positioned as something that fixes and paralyzes (Fanon 1967, 109; Hall 1990, 233; Weate 2001, 174). However, since the external gaze is unable to place them, my respondents fail to be fixed by it. Their ambivalent social location creates a ‘space of possibility,’ which enables them to produce a horizon of responses to the questioning external gaze, which, in turn, work to negotiate the gaze. I will be drawing on Fanon’s (1967) work in order to discuss the external gaze.

1 Acknowledgements: Travel assistance provided by the Mary Louise Imrie Graduate Student Award.
DEFINITIONS

Race discourse is a complex area, but for the purpose of my project, by ‘mixed race’ I am referring to people who are of a mixed racial background, which I define as those whose biological parents are from different racialized groups, meaning, “socially defined” racial groups (Streeter 1996, 316). Some may argue that studying “mixed race” reifies the socially constructed category of race and works to essentialize racial identities. Aligning myself with Critical Race Theory, I see race as a social construction, yet it is a category that is nonetheless significant in people’s lives, one with real social meaning and effect (Alcoff 2006, 4; Crenshaw 1995, xxxii).

METHOD

My research participants were recruited through word of mouth and snowball sampling, as well as through various university department, student association and student organization list serves at the University of Alberta. My respondents ranged in age from 21-32. As my peer group, this is a population that was easily accessible to me. I also only sought out Canadian born participants. This helped to manage the range of the study, in that my respondents are from a particular historical cohort: one that grew up in an officially multicultural and increasingly diverse Canada.

The interviews were semi-structured in format. This model enabled me to ask the questions I wanted to, yet was flexible with an open-ended approach, which was the best way to make my respondents feel comfortable sharing and talking about their experiences.

MY IDENTITY

To position myself, my personal interest in this topic extends from my own identification with a mixed race identity, and from a desire to understand my own identity negotiating experiences. I am also aware that my own identity and experiences affect the context of the interview, in terms of the “social relationship” (Bornat 2007, 36) that is formed between myself, the interviewer, and the interviewee. Overall, throughout the research process it has been necessary for me to continually reflect on finding a balance between the potentially problematic nature of my own identity, in terms of it blinding me to experiences and meanings that are not like my own, and the potential helpfulness of my own identity, in terms of it helping me to be empathetic with my participants and putting them at ease.
CONTEXT OF EDMONTON

The location of the project, Edmonton, Alberta, was as a result of my physical location and that of my university. However, it should also be noted that this context shapes the study’s findings. Edmonton is becoming an increasingly racially diverse city, however it is not as racially diverse as Canada’s largest cities. For instance, according to the 2006 federal census what Statistics Canada refers to as the “visible minority” population, meaning those belonging to racialized non-white groups, included 22.9% of its total population (StatCan, Community Profiles: Edmonton, 2006). This is an increase of 3.2% from the 2001 federal census (StatCan, Community Profiles: Edmonton, 2001). Overall the experiences and narratives of my participants reflect the racialized character of the city of Edmonton. Context shapes not only how my participants are perceived and how people approach and respond to them, but what negotiations they engage in.

MIXED RACE LITERATURE

The frequency of mixed unions and mixed race populations are growing in Canada (Milan, Maheux and Chui 2010, 71), yet there is currently a dearth of mixed race identity literature in the Canadian context. Scholars such as Camper (1994), Hill (2001) Mahtani (2002), Taylor (2008), and Taylor, James and Saul (2007) have begun to develop a knowledge base on mixed race identity in Canada through their writings and empirical research, and I see myself as building upon their work in order to further contribute to the knowledge base of mixed race scholarship in Canada.

Academic literature on mixed race identity has increased in volume in the past two decades in the UK and the US contexts (Parker and Song 2001, 1-22). Earlier literature in these contexts tended to emphasize the existence of a mixed race pathology. For instance, Park (1928, 881-893) and Stonequist (1937) developed a psychosocial theory of the “marginal man” to describe the experiences of those with one white and one black parent in the US. Not fitting into either racial groups was said to result in a sense of social ímbo, and being “emotionally and psychologically confused,” which in turn led to a psychopathy for the person of mixed race (Owusu-Bempah 2006, 315). Overall, early mixed race literature rarely positioned identity formation as an interactive process (Thornton 1996, 114), instead positioning people of mixed race as fixed by their social context.

In the 1990s a new generation of mixed race researchers emerged in the Academy, many of whom self-identified with mixed race identities (Samuels 2009, 1609). This has resulted in a more concerted set of critical reflections and research on
mixed race experiences, and contributed to a movement towards a more critical mixed race scholarship. For instance, in more recent literature there has been a movement towards emphasizing the ways people of mixed race assert their identities (Root 1996, 7; Song 2003, 63), highlighting how many individuals of mixed race have the experience of negotiating between their own conceptions of themselves and the conceptions that others have of them, and that a consciousness and reflexivity of this process is especially salient for such individuals. Furthermore, as Root (1994, 456) asserts, any emotional issues that relate to being ‘mixed race’ likely stem from a racist environment, as opposed to an internal conflict.

Overall, within current mixed race literature there is recognition that people of mixed race engage in identity negotiations, and that this is a shared experience among people of mixed race. However, building on the critical mixed race literature, my findings suggest that what people of mixed race share is not just the experience of identity negotiation, but the social space that enables them to engage in this negotiation. People of mixed race cross and challenge dominant racial binaries: they exceed the limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse and are therefore socially situated as ambivalent (Anzaldúa 1987, 79; Taylor 2008, 94). In turn, people of mixed race are able to negotiate through this ambivalent space. Since the external gaze is unable to place them, they are not fixed by it, enabling them to engage in a negotiation of it. In addition, my findings suggest that people of mixed race, in contrast to some of the critical mixed race literature (Root 1994, 456) do exist in a type of ‘social limbo,’ in that they are socially situated as ambivalent, however rather than being fixed, as positioned by those in the early literature (Park 1928, 881-893; Stonequist 1937), they negotiate through this ambivalence. Their ambivalent social location, rather than creating a pathology, creates a space of possibility for negotiation.

Questioning

In their everyday lives, people of mixed race are subject to constant questioning, which has been addressed within critical mixed race literature (Bradshaw 1992, 83; Huang Kingsley 1994, 113-115; Root 1998, 102; Song 2003, 64). Many people of mixed race continuously get asked the question, or variations of the question ‘what are you?’ I position ‘the moment’ of the ‘what are you?’ question as a manifestation of the external gaze.

For instance, of being asked the ‘what are you? question, my research participant Monica states, “that’s a regular question for me,” and Veronica states, “oh, you know I’ve gotten that question a million (emphasis) times. So, I’m just so used to it....”
Demonstrating how people of mixed race are questioned in the course of their everyday lives Sarah states, “I think people would ask me – usually when I was waitressing or something like that, they’d be like ‘oh, what background are you?’” When I asked Sarah how she felt about being subject to such questions she states, “I just don’t care (laughter), it just doesn’t phase me anymore.” Jennifer expressed a similar sentiment towards the questions she is asked in her everyday life stating, “I don’t really react to them any more (laughter)….it’s just one of those things, that you roll your eyes and you explain to people” speaking to how frequently she is subject to questions.

Overall, my participants’ narratives speak to the prominence and normalization of questions in the everyday lives of people of mixed race: for them the ‘questioning interaction’ is an ‘everyday encounter.’ Furthermore, such questioning demands an explanation of them. People of mixed race are often subject to the expectations of others to explain their existence through questioning (Song 2003; 64). In addition such questions work to “heighten the feel of otherness” (Root 1998, 102).

As those within critical mixed race literature have discussed, questioning seeks to situate people of mixed race within dominant racial binaries (Gilbert 2005, 65; Song 2003, 64): the questioning demand reflects the limited and binary racialized landscape. As Song states, “the politicized discourse around racial identity tends to be dual and exclusive in nature: i.e. black or white rather than black and white” (2003, 63-64). Therefore, people of mixed race occupy a socially ambivalent space as determined by dominant binary discourses (Anzaldúa 1987, 79; Taylor 2008, 94).

When I asked my participant Sarah why she thinks people question her. She states:

I think it’s because they can’t classify you into a specific group…“oh, well she’s Asian but not really”…and, my brother’s got dark black hair and a bright red goatee. And people [ask] “did you dye your hair?” And he [says] “why would I do that?” you know his goatee - “did you bleach it?” and he [says] “no”…and [they’re thinking] ‘something’s not quite right with them…’

Here Sarah expresses how the external gaze is uncertain how to read her and her brother: they are socially situated as ambivalent. Overall, the ambivalent social location of people of mixed race renders them “hypervisible” (Mahtani 2002, 429) to the questioning external gaze: the gaze is uncertain where to place or how to respond to the person of mixed race, which leads to questioning (Bradshaw 1992, 77).
NEGOTIATING THE GAZE

People who belong to racialized groups are ‘marked’ by race, and experience an ‘external racial gaze,’ which seeks to fix racial categories on them. Through the interaction of ‘the gaze’ power is exerted over the one who is ‘looked upon’ or ‘read’ by the gaze. Within the literature on the ‘racial’ gaze, the gaze is often positioned as something that fixes and paralyzes (Fanon 1967, 109; Hall 1990, 233; Weate 2001, 174). By ‘reading’ people through the act of ‘looking,’ the external gaze seeks to name them: it solely permits a limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse.

Fanon (1967) is considered a key contributor to the development of the literature on the ‘racial gaze.’ He positions the racial gaze as something that fixes and paralyzes the people who are subject to it, so much so that they internalize how they are ‘read’ by others as how they understand themselves. Therefore, those who are subject to the gaze are not able to negotiate this; they are fixed. As Fanon states:

...the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a due. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart (1967, 109).

However, since the gaze is unsure of where to place my participants within the limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse in the social landscape, this enables them to negotiate the gaze, rather than be fixed by it. The uncertainty of the gaze creates a ‘space of possibility,’ which enables my participants to produce a horizon of responses to the questioning external gaze, working to negotiate it.

HORIZON OF RESPONSES

My participants expressed a horizon of responses in their encounters with the gaze throughout their narratives. These include expressing conscious identity narratives, ‘turning’ the gaze and ‘playing on’ the gaze, which are the various narratives my participants have devised in order to respond to the gaze.

Conscious Identity Narratives

Firstly, my participants respond to the gaze by developing ‘conscious identity narratives.’ In the interviews, they expressed narratives they have ready in order to negotiate and deal with the questions of the external gaze. These work to ease the constant experience of being subject to the gaze in their everyday lives, which they experience as a result of their ambivalent social location. Furthermore, for some of my participants, the formation of ‘conscious identity narratives’ also acts as a way, through
being questioned, for my participants to assert themselves, using it as an opportunity to explore. In turn, the moment of the questioning gaze can also work as a salient instance of identity negotiation.

For instance, Veronica relayed her thought process of developing her identity narrative of “half Chinese and half Caribbean.” She explains her use of the term “Caribbean” when people question her as opposed to using her mother’s home country of Trinidad by stating:

I use that term...because nobody knows where Trinidad is it seems...’cause it’s such a small island, so people would always be like “where is Trinidad?” so I just ended [up] saying “Caribbean” and...if people ask where in the Caribbean, then I’ll tell them, but usually people don’t... it’s just easier (emphasis added) (laughter).

Jess described how she has crafted her narrative in order to avoid being asked more questions, speaking to how she seeks to ease the experience of the gaze. When I asked Jess to describe her racial background, she states:

I’m half Chinese, half Norwegian - or half white...but usually people say “oh who’s Chinese in your family, your mom or your dad?”...so to avoid (emphasis added) having another question, I usually just say my mom’s from Hong Kong and my dad was born in Saskatchewan.

Overall, this stockpile of answers my participants have ready is meant to deflect and avoid being subject to further questions. In turn, my participants negotiate fixity, by using the moment of the questioning external gaze as an opportunity to explore. The moment of the gaze enables them to think about how they want to assert and present themselves, influencing the development of their conscious identity narratives. For instance, Jennifer states.

It depends how curious people are...“I come from a mixed background” I start with that. And then I’ll get into it “well, my dad’s black and my mom’s white” and then people kind of look at me funny, and “well, you don’t look black”...It’s interesting to talk about. And I find that [when] I talk to people, I kind of explore my boundaries...where they’re pushed [and] - depending on where other people resist.

Ned also described why his conscious identity narrative has formed, and how the moment of the questioning gaze has led him to think about his identity, working as a salient instance of identity negotiation. He states:

I guess as I get older the similar questions do come up but I think I have kind of...shortened it up a bit....I think it’s like if someone asked you about a scar that you have or something like that, or...some sort of birth
mark or something that you’re just like “yeah, yeah, that’s my birth mark - that’s my background.” But, I guess…I streamlined it a bit, but. Again, I think I wouldn’t have thought about it that much if people [wouldn’t have] asked me in the first place. So, I think as people ask me I do kind of question it myself and think about it more myself.

‘Turning’ the Gaze

Secondly, my research participants respond to the gaze by ‘turning’ it: rather than solely be fixed by the gaze and how it reads them, they also read the person questioning them, ‘turning’ the gaze and working to negotiate it. For instance they alter how they interact and respond to the questioner depending on their reading of how the questioner approaches them and their relationship with the questioner. Context also comes into play in this ‘turning’ interaction. For instance, my respondents expressed how they move in and out of certain identifications depending on context.

For instance, Melissa described how she alters how she interacts with the person questioning her, depending on how the questioner approaches her. She states, “I think I’ve been asked so many times that when someone asks me, I can gage based on who they are and where we are, what answer to give them.” Monica echoed this, stating:

...a lot of my thing depends on context...I just feel like, if it seems relevant, if it seems kind of sensitive, and consciously asked - and relevance is important “why do they need to know?”...is...something that I quickly think in the head. So if it seems that it’s relevant, and I can kind of guess why they want to know...and it comes from just some kind of...a conscious place... it doesn’t bother me. And I’m generally happy to talk about it. But if it comes from a[n]...ignorant kind of place...just the context of that again can be a range.

Anne emphasized the role her relationship with the questioner plays in how she interacts with them, stating:

...if I had just met somebody, and they’re like “well what are you?” then I’m kind of offended almost, ‘cause I don’t just come up to you and say “what are you?”...I don’t think I’ve ever done that to somebody...so what right do you have...? I don’t know, and maybe that’s changing, like it’s okay to ask people that, but I’m kind of taken aback by that. But, say I know somebody, and we’ve had a relationship, or it’s somebody – one of my friends....if there’s a relationship there, it’s okay.
Other participants expressed how context effects how they move in and out of certain identifications: their ambivalent social location opens up a space of possibility for negotiation. For instance, James states:

I think definitely, we pick and choose which side is stronger depending on the situation, and what side of us we want to reflect. There’s a lot more fluidity and deciding when you want to be what part of the other, when is convenient….

‘Playing on’ the Gaze

Thirdly, my participants respond to the gaze by ‘playing on’ it, which works to remake and negotiate it. By ‘playing on’ the gaze my participants actively work to challenge others’ assumptions of them, exceeding the limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse imposed on them. For instance, they at times play off of the categories given to them, and work to complicate the assumptions of the external gaze, and to disrupt others’ assumptions of them, engaging in a negotiation.

Jolanda described why she ‘plays on’ the gaze, stating:

…it gets tiring getting that question, and…at the end of the day it’s one of those things…I have to deal with having to answer…for myself all the time, whereas a lot of people don’t, and… it’s really something so inconsequential, that sometimes it’s just like why not have some fun with it. Yeah, it can get annoying sometimes to…I understand it, but I mean, it doesn’t mean you’re always going to get a serious answer from me if you’re going to be asking it…

Ja described how she seeks to disrupt others’ assumptions of her stating:

They expect something – like I do wear a flower in my hair, but that’s something I did, and not has anything to do with race. And so it’s always this “ohhh, what’s that racially?” “is that a tradition?” “does that mean something?”…I have played with that (laughing)… Depending on my mood, and how they approached it and stuff, it changes. Like sometimes I allow them to think that I’m a certain thing, and other times I don’t…or else I just make fun of them by being like “yeah, this is total culture”…just because it makes me laugh (laughter).

She goes on to state:

And so when they think that I wear a flower in my hair because it’s a cultural thing, or sometimes I think I’m really funny by just playing up something that’s not real. But it’s like a constant struggle….

Therefore, Ja ‘plays on’ the gaze, working to negotiate it, and further demonstrates that the gaze does not necessarily fix: through her ambivalent social location, others are
unsure of how to place her, and this ambivalent space in turn enables her to ‘play on’ the gaze, engaging in a negotiation of it.

Erin also described enjoying being vague about herself when questioned, another way of ‘playing on’ the gaze. She states:

I’ve recently enjoyed dabbling in being really vague...I get really vague about it, and I just leave it like that, but, I don’t know, sometimes you can play it up and get favours and discounts because “oh yeah, it’s Polish” (laughter) ten bucks off of my sausage... yeah, I actually kind of enjoy doing that, I don’t know how manipulative that is, or not...(laughter).

In these ways, my participants ‘play on’ the gaze. They respond to the gaze by developing narratives that actively work to negotiate the external gaze and challenge others’ assumptions and positionings of them. They remake the gaze, exceeding the limited horizon of possible narratives, playing off of the categories that are given to them and challenge others’ assumptions of them.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, people of mixed race cross and challenge dominant racial binaries: they exceed the limited horizon of possible narratives of racial discourse and are therefore socially situated as ambivalent (Anzaldua 1987, 79; Taylor 2008, 94). Within the literature on the ‘racial gaze’ the gaze is often positioned as something that fixes and paralyzes. However, since the external gaze is unable to place them, my respondents fail to be fixed by it, and the uncertainty of the gaze creates a ‘space of possibility,’ which enables my respondents to produce a horizon of responses to the questioning external gaze, which work to negotiate it.

As I continue to shape my thesis project, I am interested in expanding on how gender complicates the various responses to the gaze and delimits the various negotiations of my participants. Furthermore, I am interested in theorizing on how agency comes into play within these negotiations, and the implications of these negotiations of the gaze for how race is understood.
WORKS CITED


