



REVIEW ESSAY

The Alchemy of Mixed Race

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Raiding the Gene Pool: the social construction of mixed race

Jill Olumide

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Rethinking "Mixed Race"

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Introduction

We are, in Britain, witnessing high levels of co-habitation, marriages and romantic liaisons between different ethnic and racial groups (Alibhai-Brown 2001: 78). According to the latest census statistics for England and Wales, 660,000 people described themselves as being of mixed ethnicity. The largest mixed group is white and black Caribbean - 237,000, of whom 137,000 (57.5%) are aged 15 and under (ONS 2003). Extrapolating from this data, the number of Britons *involved* in mixed raced situations is much greater than this number, and growing. The mixed race/ethnicity population is now the third largest minority in the UK, 14.6% of the total ethnic minority population, second to the Indian and Pakistani communities and larger than the Caribbean and African populations (ONS 2003). Findings from the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities indicate that just over half of Caribbean men had white partners, and a third of Caribbean women had white partners. 39% of Caribbean children have one white parent, mostly a black father and a white mother (Modood, Berthoud et al. 1997: 30f.).¹

The statistics point to a significant phenomenon, which has gone unrecognised. The academic response has been slow and underdeveloped, however the books reviewed here attempt to rectify this situation. The Parker and Song volume offers an eclectic collection of papers, from British and North American contributors, with differing perspectives on the subject of mixed-race². While Jill Olumide's book, based primarily on qualitative research in the UK, explores the narratives of those who are involved in what she refers to as 'mixed-race situations'.

Mainstream sociology has argued that race is a socio-political construct with a history (cf. Bulmer and Solomos 1999: 1-20) and that it has no scientific validity based on biological/genetic research. Nevertheless, as most writers on the subject admit, race as an *ideology* is very much alive. In other words, one does not require races, understood as naturalised biological kinds, to have racism. In fact, understood as ideology, racism can and does exist in the absence of minority races in the immediate population (e.g., Macmaster 2001: 20). That is, race as an organising principle, which structures the

¹ The authors note also that there were significant numbers of children born to Chinese-White parents in their study.

² Race, mixed-race (and corollary terms of black/white, etc.) are of course contested concepts, in their meanings as social constructs, and the lack of scare quotes in the review does not imply that they are unproblematic or naturalised.



beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals, groups and institutions in a relationship of dominance and exploitation. The assumptions of such an ideology are: that there are separate and identifiable racial groups, which are related hierarchically. Also, that an individual's so-called race determines, to a significant extent, their personality and moral/intellectual capacities. Thus, it follows in such a paradigm that racial mixing is taboo.

This is the ideological terrain which both books explore. They pose the following questions: in such an environment, how is racial mixing constructed and deconstructed, in terms of discourse and discursive practices? What ideological purposes are being served? Moreover, how do the parents and children in mixed-race situations cope and experience their life-worlds in what are often hostile environments, where they are seen as threats to established racial orders?

Ideology and Mixed Race

Olumide's book advances an historical argument for a commonality of experiences of mixed-race and presents evidence to support the idea that race mixing as a 'problem' has been a constant preoccupation of elites. It traces the roots of racist ideology in the pre-modern era and suggests that in the recent past the social and scientific discourse in the West on mixed-race has tended to reinforce racist thinking on mixing. This in turn has influenced state policies such as the US anti-miscegenation laws and Immorality laws in South Africa, which made racial mixing illegal. Historically the ideology of racism has been synonymous with scientific racism in its most virulent form, although of course the foundations go further back in European history (cf. Segal 1995, Thomas 1997). Under the auspices of racial science, mixed-race was seen as a biological aberration that would 'weaken' or 'dilute' the superior white race/s. Clearly, the issue of 'racial purity' is dialectically related to the positive value given to whiteness. In its absent presence, as a naturalised non-racial identity, whiteness plays a pivotal role in race ideology. Olumide suggests that mixing race disturbs the racial order, and reveals the conditionality of white privilege, especially for women. As quoting from one respondent illustrates:

As a white woman out on my own, I can go anywhere. As a white woman with my black kids, I am called names. As a white woman out with black kids and a black man, I am a 'white bitch' and my kids are 'black bastards' (p. 31).

Clearly, whiteness is not monolithic and is structured by gender and class. Nevertheless it is at the juncture of mixture that whiteness reveals itself, makes itself known, as privilege which must be guarded, and for those who transgress, compromised. Women are thus treated as transgressors who have failed in their implicit duty to reproduce 'own-kind' (*sic*). Olumide makes the link between the implied control of women's reproduction and the patrolling of racial borders.

Despite Olumide's suggestive remarks on whiteness as a racial category, however, she does not fully develop the idea in her work. Also, her historical arguments and excerpts from the history of mixed race, although necessarily selective, miss important moments. For a book on mixed race, she misses the opportunity to explore the different racialisation process in Latin America; one that has always permitted a larger space for mixed-race identity but conversely less social space *to be black*. One would perhaps have expected to find a footnote on Brazil, a nation of mixed-race relationships (cf. Thomas 1995; Kraay 1995). In addition the historical formation of whiteness is not treated in any detail. (cf. Allen, 1994, Ignatiev, 1995, Jacobson 1998, Roediger, 1991). However, this is not a serious criticism, as the historical data is potentially overwhelming.

Social Science and Mixed Race

Frank Furedi's contribution to the Song & Park volume, 'How Sociology Imagined Mixed-Race', makes a strong case for the complicity of sociological discourses of pathology on mixed-race in the early twentieth century. He documents a shift from overt biologically grounded strictures on mixing race to a psychosocial conceptualisation of mixed-race propounded by social scientists. Furedi argues persuasively that the ideas of class and breeding were the lens through which elite discourses viewed race mixing. For example, in the 1930's and 1940s, those who mixed, mostly poor working class women, were labelled pathological and immoral. It is within this context, that both Furedi and Olumide discuss the seminal importance and influence, in Britain and the US, of American sociologist E.V. Stonequist's (1937) study the *Marginal Man: A study in Personality and Culture Conflict*.

Stonequist's idea was that the 'marginal man' was a fragmented being: an individual who was not firmly rooted in a particular culture. Thus, it was applied to the educated colonial subject, the urban 'Negro' and epitomised by the mixed race individual. It provided an explanation for black frustration and reactions against racism as a form of psychological maladjustment. Rather than seeking explanations in the environment, they supposed the problem resided in the individual. What Stonequist and other leading sociologists of the time did in propounding the idea of 'marginal man' was give new life to the 'tragic mulatto' of literature and added social scientific credence to racial prejudices. As Furedi surmises,

The discourse on the in-between person was a discussion of the maintenance of existing social, cultural and racial boundaries. By his very existence the marginal man was seen to question the durability of these boundaries... The insistence on moral difference represented an attempt to uphold a line and repulse those whom claimed an equal status. They might be 'in-between' but they were not conceptualised as a bridge between the races. (p. 35f.)

This theme is echoed in Olumide's rich qualitative data, that mixed-race children and adults are often made to feel, by others, that they are 'incomplete' or must be maladjusted by being 'in-between' races, cultures, ethnicities, and religions.

The Lived Experience of Mixed-Race

Olumide advances a theoretical account of the lived experiences of those engaged in mixed-race situations. Her theory is grounded in her empirical study: interviews with people who inhabit mixed-race situations. She provides a definition of what she refers to as the mixed-race condition, which 'refers to the patterns and commonality of experience among those who obstruct whatever purpose race is being put to at a particular time' (p. 2). This makes it clear that she views the mixed-race condition as subversive and *deconstructive* of racial ideology. Her idiosyncratic definition stands up rather well, in that it captures the complexity of mixed-race situations, for it covers more than mixed-race individuals but all manner of different family contexts which are richly illustrated in her data.

The latter part of Olumide's book is the most interesting. Here she presents her interview data which exemplify with sublime clarity the condition of mixed-race, its paradoxes, illusions, its tragedies, its successes; of individuals coping in a racial maelstrom. She explores how themes of 'difference' are played out in family and public contexts. Some of the themes that emerge from her data are strategies that those in mixed-race conditions enact in their daily lives. Parents spoke of the need to 'prepare' their children and support them but there were divergent views on what was to be done. Some thought that difference should be acknowledged and children taught to value both their heritages, whereas others expressed a desire to teach that racial difference does not matter. As she



points out this is often difficult to put in practice, especially for children who are either transracially adopted or in single parent families or families where the ancestral home of one parent is geographical distant. Moreover, the assumption made by parents is that they each represent a complete 'culture' to a child, and in many cases it is the 'ethnic' or non-white 'culture' that is referred to when one hears that a mixed-race child must know their 'culture'.

A constant theme is the idea that mixed relationships are wrong, or from the perspective of the mixed-race individual that they had the 'wrong parents' (*sic*). This is something that one of Olumide's interviewees articulates: a woman of Jewish parents and whose son has an African father.

I think white women with mixed race children are often assumed to have adopted their kids. When my son was a baby people used to talk to me and be all friendly and to admire the baby in his pram. If they said anything about being a foster parent I just used to say, 'no, he's mine.' You could see their faces change as the full horror of me having slept with a black man slowly dawned. Then they'd get embarrassed and hurry off. It just is not supposed to happen (p. 107).

It is puzzling that Olumide does not comment on the rather suggestive remark made here, on the 'horror of having slept with a black man'. The horror being referred to is the last taboo that stalks the mixed-race condition and our discussion: ideas, fantasies and stereotypes of sexuality. Here are issues bound up with slavery, colonialism, myths of 'primitive' black hyper-sexuality and black bodies (cf. Kohn 1995: 117; Pieterse 1995; Fanon 1967: 63). The content of the abuse reported in her study confirm these complex legacies and ideas. For white women, being called 'nigger lovers' and 'slags' reveal the racist assumption that white women can only be attracted to black men because they are sexually promiscuous, hence immoral, or deficient in some way. For black women, the imputed motives are a desire to 'trade up'; the assumption being that mixing is driven by a desire, perhaps, for 'class mobility' or white privilege, which is revealing in itself; again issues of class intersect with issues of race and gender.

In addition to the sexualising of mixed race is the view that mixing is a form of betrayal to one's ethnicity/race. Again, Olumide's data is corroborated by similar studies (e.g., Alibhai-Brown 2001: 25). Least the impression is given that only the white community expresses strong disapproval of racial mixing; according to the findings of a recent survey (Modood, Berthoud et al. 1997), 40% of Pakistanis in their sample said that they would mind very much if a close relative were to marry a white person, the highest amongst all the minorities polled. It is interesting to note that the question was only asked in reference to marriage with white partners.

Ifekwunigwe's chapter in the Parker and Song volume, 'Re-Membering "Race"', also provides thought-provoking narratives which give an insight into the paradoxes of racial classification. She discusses Ruby, a mixed African and English woman, married to a white Englishman, who describes an incident where her white female friend was assumed to be the mother of her children who look phenotypically white. Ifekwunigwe comments:

While their physical appearances enable Ruby's children to occupy the privileged space of Whiteness, for Ruby, being or becoming White is never presented as a public option...in a public domain Ruby must disinherit the very children to whom she has given birth and whom in the domestic sphere nurtures (p. 52).

These are the everyday and sometimes painful paradoxes where the mixed-race condition confront and confound racial ideology, where white women give birth to black children and those black children can give birth to white children. What the narratives

presented in both Ifekwunigwe and Olumide's work show, is that 'folk' classifications of race are deeply aesthetic, and are quite arbitrary. People are trying to read into the mixed body, racial essences with often painful results. What comes out clearly from their interview data is that despite the difficulties they face, mixed-race individuals are forging positive identities which are more than the sum of their heritages.

Who is Mixed-Race?

The Parker and Song volume also contains two extremely insightful papers by Minelle Mahtani and April Moreno, 'Same Difference' and 'I'm a Blonde-Haired, Blue-Eyed Black Girl'. Mahtani, (herself of Iranian and Indian heritage), and Moreno, (of Chinese and Mexican American ancestry), widen the scope of the debate by pointing out that most of the writing on mixed race has focused on the mixing of bi-polar categories of white and black, and has had little to say about other mixtures between individuals who are *not* white. This they argue leaves out an important area of racialised experience which cannot be simply mapped onto the white/black paradigm; that mixed-race is not the same thing as part-white. Thus, they call into question the meaning of mixed-race and to whom it applies.

Mahtani suggests that being 'differently' mixed has its own ontology: 'I feel that my relationship to whiteness is fraught with a different kind of tension than those who claim partial white heritage' (p. 68). The tension is an interesting one. It could of course be argued that in fact both authors are not mixed-race but multi-ethnic. But, as they rightly reply, who decides and by what criteria? Even to assume that there is an answer to who is and is not mixed-race is to beg many questions about what constitutes a race, an ethnicity, and a culture. Quite clearly, if we employ Olumide's definition of mixed-race, as an *obstruction* of racial ideology, they are evidently, and rightly, mixed-race. Their racial ambiguity endangers racial borders. More pernicious is the premise that perhaps mixing with white is the only kind of mixture that deserves the name. As Moreno articulates from her experience:

When people ask me about 'my background', they often respond with comments about how interesting it must be to be mixed, yet very often follow with their comments on their 'favourite' mixes, which usually involve 'mixes' with white heritage. I often feel insulted by this, as people (indirectly) seem to be telling me that 'being mixed is beautiful and exotic, but you would be even more attractive if you were part white' (p. 70).

They propose, as living exemplars, that the concept of mixed-race does and should go beyond black and white, and as academics this needs to be reflected in our theories and understandings.

By all accounts, most African-Americans have significant European ancestry (cf. Parra et al. 1998). Thus, to some extent, most black Americans are *already* mixed-race. This revelation, if one can call it that, has coincided with a mini-boom in biographical writings in the US on those 'discovering' their mixed heritages. Paul Spikard, contribution to the Parker and Song collection 'The Subject is Mixed Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography', casts a critical eye on the situation. While generally sympathetic to such biographies, he wonders for whom, and how are these biographies consumed? Most of the biographies he surveys are about black and white mixtures (e.g., Gregory Williams' *Life On The Colour Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*). He wryly suggests that:

perhaps such biographies may be popular because they are comfortable vehicles by which White readers can enter into the exotic and frightening world of Blacks in the company of a domesticated, half-white guide... [it] is odd testimony to the degree to



which the Black-White encounter holds centre stage in the American racial imagination despite the presence of many other important racial dynamics' (p. 77f.).

Counting Mixed-Race

Charlie Owen's contribution, "'Mixed Race" in Official Statistics', discusses mixed-race as a statistical category, and problems of counting mixed race. This is highly pertinent because, for the first time, in the latest US and British census, data on mixed race was directly collected. This represents a dramatic shift, largely brought about by pressure groups representing mixed-race communities, expressing, on both sides of the Atlantic, dissatisfaction with standard classifications. He suggests statistics which indicate the young age profile of the mixed population in the UK are not statistical artefacts, created by well meaning parents, but track a demographically significant and relatively ignored population of children.³

Owen notes the sometimes seemingly arbitrary instructions given to census coders of the 1991 census in the UK. Where a response such as 'English-West Indian' is coded as mixed, when written without the hyphen is classified as non-mixed. He comments, that 'while these coding rules are clear, and provide consistent coding rules for different coders, it is obvious that they are arbitrary and in no way objective' (p. 142). The problem is that in the 1991 census mixed individuals were encouraged to identify with one ethnic or racial group, whereas the census of 2001 had a mixed category. In the US, the census authorities took a different route from the British and allowed individuals to tick more than one category. Although Owen points out that many mixed-race organisations objected and argued for a mixed category. There are those who argue that because mixed-race individuals are discriminated against, the introduction of such a category is divisive to black or minority solidarity.

While the recent censuses represent a real step forward in our quantitative understanding of the mixed population, there are obvious conceptual difficulties with both the American and the UK approaches. How many generations of mixture count? Conversely when do we stop counting successive offspring as mixed? When do they become naturalised and unambiguously 'white' or black or whatever? If families within a generation can change race, what does this tell us about racial classifications in the first place? Clearly mixed race is a fluid concept, the challenge for the state and the sociological literature is how to track and keep up with this reality.

Conclusions

Olumide is in no doubt that mixed-race is a 'slimy' concept, (a term she borrows from Zygmunt Bauman). The mixed-race condition undermines race ideology and the order it seeks to maintain. It exposes the fiction of pure races, and thus: 'to maintain order, ambiguity must apparently be reduced either through its exclusion, its incorporation into the non-ambiguous, or else its extermination' (p. 155).

Both books raise more questions than they answer, but this should be expected. For those interested in the new and interesting directions the sociology and politics of identity/race/ethnicity may be heading these are fascinating and stimulating readings. The condition of mixed race is a salutary reminder of our own ambivalent and complex identities, a point that Stuart Hall (1996: 4) captures when he says that:

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting

³ The mixed-race population has the most youthful age profile, 55% of those identified as mixed-race, in the most recent edition of Social Trends, were under the age of 16; the proportion of the white population under 16 was 19% (Summerfield & Babb 2003: 32).

and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions... [and] are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

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