

REVIEW ESSAY

A Global Look at Mixing: Problems, Pitfalls and Possibilities

Erica Chito Childs

The importance of studying mixed race in a global perspective is gaining momentum. The global economy, growing rates of immigration, and rapidly advancing information and communication technologies have brought diverse groups in closer contact in more areas of the globe, even those previously regarded as racially and ethnically homogenous. Intermarried couples and mixed race celebrities are often heralded in media reports as examples of a growing phenomenon where race, culture and color are argued to no longer matter, even when that is far from the reality. Amidst these widespread claims of a post-racial or colorblind world, the othering of certain groups and racialized discourse remains, and is often most clear in debates over the possibility or perceived threat of intimacy and sex with racialized Others. Mixing across established boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion or tribe is still dangerous, and these realities need to be studied globally. While countless academic studies and media reports have been devoted to investigating, documenting and/or explaining this phenomenon of mixed identities and relationships, many questions remain unanswered. Who can marry whom? What are attitudes toward “mixing?” How do the children of mixed couples identify? What differences matter? How are these differences articulated and what are the underlying reasons that these perceived differences matter, particularly when it comes to intimate and familial relations? And in an ever-changing globalised world, is there a way to understand the experiences of mixed people and families in a global context, or is there too much difference—different histories, different populations and different contexts to find common ground? Therefore this article will briefly review the current state of “mixed” research, why it

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is important to study this issue while highlighting the problems with existing approaches and emphasizing the need for a global framework for understanding mixed marriage and mixed identities.

Keywords: Mixed Race Studies; Global Mixed Race; Mixed Race; Comparative Studies; Racialisation; Othering; Whiteness

What does a Turkish/German couple in Berlin, a Coloured in South Africa, an Aborigine/Australian couple in Canberra, a Hapa in California, a Black-White couple in Rio de Janeiro, a Mixed Race Okinawan and a Hindu/Muslim couple in Jakarta have in common? These are the questions that the burgeoning area of Mixed Race Studies should be tackling, yet exploring these issues from a global perspective is new terrain. Mixing across socially constructed boundaries is certainly not new, as even the earliest societies forbid intermarriage between groups who they perceived as different and more importantly wanted to maintain the differences between. In the USA, the focus is on race and perceived racial differences, with great attention paid to interracial couples and multiracial individuals and families. The majority of the world – from Europe to Australia to Asia – emphasises ethnic and cultural divides, focusing on multi-ethnic people and intercultural marriage. Globally there is little consensus on terminology and language, ranging from inter- or multi- placed in front of cultural, ethnic, racial or any number of words with localised meanings. Yet, in reality, across the geographic divides and differences in terminology, the phenomenon they are discussing is the same – the issue of mixed marriage and mixed identities. Using the term ‘mixed’ accounts for all these differences without emphasising any particular source of difference – and allows for understanding how each country defines what is a mix, what represents a crossing of groups, of boundaries, of borders, including the internal borders that problematise the ideas of nation and country (see Dogan 2004: 325; Hantrais 2009).

While there may not be agreement on what words to use, the issue of mixed race people and relationships never seem to lose its allure. Tales of love, sex and conquest, such as William Shakespeare’s tragic story of Romeo and Juliet, star-crossed lovers doomed to die for the hatred of their families, have been told for centuries in different cultures through folklore, plays, literary novels, and more recently films, television and media. Yet, this is not just an issue in our imagination, love and family relationships matter, because they can expose underlying societal beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and difference in a society. Countless academic studies and media reports have been devoted to investigating, documenting and/or explaining this phenomenon of mixed identities and relationships. Yet, many questions remain unanswered. Who can marry whom? What are attitudes towards ‘mixing?’ How do the children of mixed couples identify? What differences matter? How are these differences articulated, and what are the underlying reasons that these

perceived differences matter, particularly when it comes to intimate and familial relations? And in an ever-changing globalised world, is there a way to understand the experiences of mixed people and families in a global context, or is there too much difference – different histories, different populations and different contexts to find common ground?

In what follows I will briefly review the current state of 'mixed' research, why it is important to study this issue while highlighting the problems with existing approaches and emphasising the need for a global framework for understanding mixed marriage and mixed identity in a global context.

Studying the Global Mix: Problems, Pitfalls and Possibilities

This is a particularly important time to study mixed identities and marriage, precisely because there is so much discussion about multiculturalism, post-racialism and colour-blindness across the socio-political landscapes of this globalised world. The global economy, growing rates of immigration and rapidly advancing information and communication technologies have brought diverse groups in closer contact in more areas of the globe, even those previously regarded as racially and ethnically homogenous. Intermarried couples and mixed race celebrities are often heralded in media reports as examples of this growing phenomenon where race, culture and colour are argued to no longer matter, even when that is far from the reality (see DaCosta 2007; Childs 2009). While there is no shortage of research on mixed marriage and mixed persons in the USA and Britain, and a growing body of literature that explores these issues in other countries, much of the existing literature looks at just one state or at best compares statistical data on intermarriage rates or characteristics of those who intermarry between a handful of countries.

In most research on intermarriage, the classic framework of assimilation has dominated, holding up intermarriage as a sign of the final stages of assimilation. A proportion of the literature still uses this assimilation and integration framework, looking at what groups intermarry as evidence of their integration into the larger society (see Alba and Nee 2003; Holloway *et al.* 2005; Trilla *et al.* 2008; Lucassen and Laarman 2009; Niedomysl *et al.* 2010; van Ham and Tammaru 2011), arguing that 'mixed ethnic partnering overcomes ethnic barriers, which indicates that ethnic differences in society are becoming less important' (van Ham and Tammaru 2011: 314). This framework is problematic on a number of levels, because it does not take into consideration the different ways racial and ethnic groups are constructed and conceptualised within society and it masks the overwhelming opposition that can still exist in the communities from which the couples come (Childs 2005).

Research on intermarriage also tends to compare intermarriage to intra-marriage, with little critical reflection on processes of racialisation, racism and oppression (see Kalmijin *et al.* 2005; Bratter and King 2008; Gaspar 2008; van Hamm and Tammaru 2011; Dribe and Lundh 2012; Feng *et al.* 2012). For example, a recent study by Feng *et al.* (2012) looked at intermarriage in Britain, using Office for National Statistics

data to analyse whether mixed ethnic unions were more likely to end in divorce than co-ethnic unions. Other studies have sought to explain how and why individuals choose to mate and date across racial and ethnic boundaries (see Trilla *et al.* 2008; Lucassen and Laarman 2009; Timmerman *et al.* 2009; Muttarak and Heath 2010; Hou and Myles 2013). These studies may provide quantitative data on the characteristics of intermarriage, yet they tell us very little about the racial and ethnic socio-political climates of the society within which these unions form, and more importantly they reproduce the idea that there is something inherently different about intermarried couples. In other words, they reproduce the idea of racial and ethnic difference as a real and natural phenomenon: 'discrete racial and ethnic groups are assumed to exist and engage in intermarriage' (Ferber 1995: 159). Rather than challenge the racialised ways that groups in different states respond to these unions, this research unwittingly presents the issue of mixed marriage as an isolated phenomenon that can be explained through a study of the couples themselves or a comparison with homogenous unions.

While intermarriage has long been viewed as a sign of assimilation, in global societies, which are increasingly multicultural, a better question to ask is whether intermarriage is seen as part of the solution or actually part of the problem? I argue that a more fitting analogy is the 'miner's canary'; the canaries miners use to alert them to a poisonous atmosphere. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2003) argue that the experiences of racial minorities, like the miner's canary can expose the underlying problems in society that ultimately affect everyone, not just minorities. In many ways, mixed unions and mixed people can also act as a miner's canary to a society's racial issues, revealing tensions and fractures that otherwise may not be seen or acknowledged. Therefore studying familial and community attitudes towards these identities and unions can serve as a lens – sometimes a microscope or at times a telescope – on larger racial and social attitudes. By turning the spotlight off the mixed individuals and couples, and onto the responses of the larger societies, the contemporary beliefs and practices of groups in society and the hierarchy of privilege and oppression can be mapped:

The steps in making a map – selection, omission, simplification, classification, the creation of hierarchies, and 'symbolization' – are all inherently rhetorical [in that] [a]ll maps strive to frame their message in the context of an audience. All maps state an argument about the world and they are propositional in nature. (Harley 2001: 163)

Mapping spaces as belonging is essential just as naming who is marriable; they serve similar purposes and like maps they show us how we live, and what differences matter in each geographical area.

Mapping attitudes towards intermarriage – who is and who is NOT an acceptable mate – offers an incisive means through imaginings of belonging – race, ethnicity, nationhood, citizenship and culture – can be critically evaluated. Attraction, relationships and in essence family membership are the resources, which can be given or withheld like access to education, employment, benefits and citizenship.

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These relationships, and who and what is perceived to be 'mixed' serve as a lens to see the larger racial structures that operate and looking comparatively can help illuminate the global similarities and differences. For example, questions such as how are social boundaries patrolled and why, or in other words whose interests are served? Looking at South America and Australia, the debate over mixed people and marriage seems to revolve around indigeneity, citizenship and national identity, such as who is Australian or who is Ecuadoran (see, for example, Elder 2007; Radcliffe 2010), and how this national identity makes one desirable (or not) as a romantic partner. In Ecuador, where there was a national project to 'make ethnic livelihoods and identities an integral part of young people's general knowledge' (Radcliffe 2010: 313), what does mixed marriage mean? While Ecuador claims to be a pluri-ethnic, multicultural society, scholars argue that a racial hierarchy exists where Afro-Ecuadoran are partially included, and mixed people or 'mestizos' are privileged along with whites. 'Reflecting and reproducing the centrality of whiteness and its socio-cultural dominance [...] embodies a systematic social inequality' (Radcliffe 2010: 314; see also Harley 2001: 158). Using geographic maps, Radcliffe argues that whites and mestizos are unmarked reflecting their ability to go anywhere where ethnic populations are confined into a specific location on the map, which promotes the idea that ethnic Others belong outside the mainstream, thereby deemed unmarriageable.

Mixing or Mixed

Over the past decade, the topic of multiracial and multi-ethnic identities has become one of the most popular in the social sciences. Significant attention has been paid to individuals' racial and ethnic identifications, yet less attention has been paid to the very relations of which they are the product, or even more importantly the familial, community and societal attitudes towards these unions, which provides the socio-political context in which mixed people must carve out their identities. It is imperative that research thoroughly examines the attitudes of those who make up the society, and the larger discourses on race, ethnicity and difference in the state. Amidst widespread claims of a post-racial or colourblind world, the Othering of certain groups and racialised discourse remains, and is often most clear in debates over the possibility or perceived threat of intimacy and sex with racialised Others.

Mixing across established boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion or tribe is still dangerous, and these realities need to be studied globally. For example, in 2014, in a rural part of West Bengal, India, a young woman was found to be dating a young man from a neighbouring, non-tribal community. For this transgression, they were brought in front of the village elders, and it was ordered for her to be raped. According to a complaint filed by the family, they were initially ordered to pay 25,00 rupees but when they could not, a group of men were allegedly told 'go enjoy the girl and have fun'. Thirteen men were arrested including the village elder who ordered the retribution (Smith 2014). Across the globe in the USA at around the same time,

House of Representatives Republican Louise Gohmert accused the Obama administration of waging the real war on women by failing to protect American women from hordes of 'criminal aliens'. Gohmert argued, '[W]e know people are coming in by the hundreds of thousands illegally [...] and this administration wants to talk about other people having a war on women when they will not defend the women that are being sexually assaulted by illegal aliens in this country', claiming there was 7695 assaults in the past six years (Isquith 2014). Gohmert does not need to mention race, ethnicity or colour for us to know what he means. This threat of sexual assault, the characterisation of men of colour as sexual predators and the use of sexual violence against oppressed groups are certainly not new.

These same sentiments can also be found in Europe, where the idea of intermarriage is changing, yet defining and maintaining the boundaries of the Other remain. In June 2012, the European Commission released an ad geared towards young Europeans between the ages of 16–24. The video, entitled 'Growing Together', features a white woman dressed in yellow representing the stars of the EU, walking calmly through a warehouse. As a gong sounds, she looks behind her as an aggressive Chinese man shouting Kung Fu slogans jumps down, an Indian master of Kalaripayattu (a martial art from the southern Indian state of Kerala) in traditional dress wielding a knife levitates towards her, and a Black man with dreadlocks cartwheels towards her in the style of Capoeira (the Brazilian martial art). The woman multiplies herself to form a circle around the men who then drop their weapons and sit down. The woman's yellow outfit then turns into the stars of the EU. The clip ends with the words, 'The more we are, the stronger we are. Click here to learn more about EU enlargement' (Watt 2012). This promotional video furthers the ideas of other cultures as inherently different, dangerous and undesirable. Most interestingly, it is done through the use of a lone white woman being threatened by a string of men of colour. By using the trope of interracial sex, particularly the gendered pairing of a white woman with men of colour (as opposed to a white man facing men of colour), the message of danger is clear.

Across Europe, debates have focused on what brings people together and whether multiculturalism leads to people bonding over racial and ethnic ties or whether there is a nationalism from citizenship that acts as a 'cultural glue' (Banting 2010: 801). In Europe, there is a widespread perception that multiculturalism has failed, illustrated in a backlash against immigration and social policies that would help newcomers or foreigners (Theo Goldberg 2006). How does this widespread belief affect mixed people and the possibility of mixed marriage? With specific socio-political environments, looking at what mixed couples matter becomes key to understanding the position of groups in a society. It ranges from the ways communities focus on those pairings which are more desirable – such as interethnic pairings in the EU or white men/Asian women pairings in both the USA and Australia – to the focus on those pairings which are most taboo – usually involving African or Black people – that these communities want to avoid or ignore at all cost.

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Further complicating the ability to study these issues, many countries, especially in Europe, keep no data on race or ethnicity, so it is unclear exactly what racial and ethnic diversity exists. For example, in Portugal, hyphenated terms such as 'black-Portuguese' or the word 'race' is not used but terms like 'second-generation immigrants', immigrant offspring and 'new Portuguese' serve the same purpose (Henriques 2011). This process of Othering still happens and one key feature is the privileging of whiteness, or lightness. Like Europe, in Australia the concept of whiteness is central to the construction of who is Australian, and what an Australian does, which has been enforced through years of story-telling in all realms from the news to the universities, from the movies to everyday interaction:

Being Australian is a complex notion that extends well beyond concepts of citizenship and it influences aspects of life that may seem unconnected to nationality. If being Australian is something attributed to a variety of characteristics, then so is being 'un-Australian' [...] the term un-Australian has become a way of trying to define what are seen as limits of acceptable behaviour in the Australian nation. (Elder 2007: 2)

Arguably, this can only be understood both locally and globally. For example, 'Australian-ness' has long been produced in relation to 'British-ness' given England was seen as the mother country. Yet, it is also defined in relation to the USA, Europe, Asia and neighbours such as New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Indonesia, as well as internal divisions from immigrants and regional differences. Scholars argue that being white was established as the norm and the closer to that norm an individual or group was the more likely they would be embraced by the nation-state. Like the rest of the world, 'Australia has a history of preferring and privileging those people who have White skin' (Moreton-Robinson 1998: 12; Elder 2007). Given the close proximity to Asia, people from Asian countries were viewed as a constant danger, an 'invasion complex' not unlike US images of Asians (Morris 1998; Papastergiadis 2004). While Asians were construed as threatening outsiders, the indigenous population were viewed as a non-white inside threat and problematised. Looking at space, belonging and the nation in terms of Australia, scholars argue that Anglo-Australians have the most power to define boundaries of place and designate who belongs where. There is a 'purifying space' of bodies where non-Anglo Australian youth can be dispersed at a shopping mall or Indigenous people removed from parks during a social event (Butcher 2003; Elder 2007: 8). These examples highlight the necessity of exploring notions of difference, particularly when it comes to mixed individuals, families and marriage, in a global framework. To return to the question asked at the beginning about what do mixed couples and people in different contexts have in common, how can we understand the construction of race, ethnicity, colour, citizenship, religion and indigeneity in one state without contemplating how these social constructions work around the world?

Towards a Global Framework

The importance of studying mixed race in a global perspective is gaining momentum (see Song 2012; King-O'Riain *et al.* 2014; Morning 2014). As Morning (2014: 2) argues, 'even if there is no utility for a "transnational model of multiraciality", cross national comparative research is necessary so there is exposure to diverse systems of racial ideology that would help us better identify the meaningful characteristics of any single one in particular [...] and help us analyse the causes and consequences of different approaches to analysing mixed identity' and marriage. Similarly, Trask (2013) argues for the importance of considering the formation of multi-ethnic, transnational families, in light of increased migration, coupled with the rapid spread of information and ability to communicate through technology, as an integral aspect of globalisation.

A new anthology, *Global Mixed Race* (2014) is one of the first works to look at mixed race populations around the globe, acknowledging the complexities and difficulties in trying to understand mixed race identities in a global context. The book is ground-breaking in its attempt to build bridges across the different experiences of mixed race people, highlighting how the different histories from those societies shape the social worlds in which these identities are negotiated. The articles explore countries with a recognised history of mixing, such as the Euraficans in Zambia, to 'settler societies' where there was always some element of mixing between the populations such as Antipodean Mixed Race in Australia, to those societies that were not known or hid their mixed roots, like the Mixed race American Okinawans (see Fozdar and Perkins 2014; King-O'Riain *et al.* 2014; Milner-Thornton 2014; Welty 2014). There is a small yet important body of research that looks at mixed race or multicultural identities in more nuanced and cutting-edge ways that begin to get at the complexities of mixedness (see Kabir 2011; Carton 2012; Mateo Dieste 2012; Rocha 2014; Ahn 2014). However, even in these ground-breaking studies that attempt to bridge the global divide in research, each article still looks at one or two states and makes it difficult to discuss the mixed experiences in relation to other states and nations, to ascertain the similarities and differences, and what it tells us about global attitudes towards racial, ethnic and religious minorities.

There are a number of factors that make a truly global study of mixed identities and relationships difficult. One reason there is a lack of cross-comparative research lies in the varied language used for marrying across groups in different geographic regions. Globally there is little consensus of what unions are called, sometimes intercultural, interethnic, interracial or any number of words with localised meanings. In relation to studying multiraciality and census classification, Morning (2014) highlights the importance of understanding the impact of language, particularly in the terms available in different locales such as ethnicity, race, nationality, ancestry, cultural group and indigenous group. She argues that the racial classification schema used in different countries not only reflects the dominant socio-political ideologies, but also has serious repercussions on the identity choices of mixed people. Moreover, 'the ability to understand the way in which units are socially and culturally

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constructed and expressed through language is critical in gaining a proper understanding of their defining characteristics' (Hantrais 2009: 54). This is tied to the history of intergroup contact, the racial, ethnic and religious groups involved, as well as the dominant ideologies and national discourses on issues of race, ethnicity, immigration, citizenship and belonging. For example, in the USA, the issue is largely discussed as interracial with less attention or meaning attached to notions of intercultural, inter-religious or inter-ethnic, to the point that those concepts are rarely even heard; in Europe, race is rarely if ever used, and the issue of mixed marriage involves intricate discussions of ethnicity, culture and religion. How to compare mixed identities or mixed marriage when the language used, and the meanings attached to these words varies is a serious consideration, especially given no comparison is neutral, in terms of the comparisons made, and the geographical spaces chosen or omitted (Green 1994; Hantrais 2009).

Still I would argue that it is possible and desirable to bridge the existing gaps in the literature. One approach is to look globally at media and popular culture representations of mixed people and couples. Through the realms of media and popular culture, racialised beliefs about relationships, intimacy and marriage are produced and reproduced, and then dispersed to global audience through television, film and most importantly, the Internet. Production happens through a certain kind of repetition, a familiar story we have heard countless times before and want to continue to hear, even in repackaged forms (Childs 2009). Furthermore, media tends to pounce on stories, which fit with the dominant ideologies of race and difference. Not surprisingly then, media accounts of the mixed experience tend to either highlight the growing acceptance of these unions, positing each society as increasingly tolerant and colourblind, or as a dangerous threat to the larger society (Childs 2009; Schoul 2013; *BBC News* 2014). Racial, ethnic, gender and sexual stereotypes run through not only the media and popular culture representations, but right into the common-sense beliefs and everyday understandings of individuals and groups around the world. Considering how these images and discourses spread, these media representations by the dominant groups in society, as well as the growing number of 'people of mixed origins (who) are at the forefront of the production and dissemination of these images' are important to study (King-O'Riain *et al.* 2014: xii). Looking globally, particularly in this transnational era, what differences matter? And from these differences can we find a framework for understanding global relations?

Uncovering these points of convergence can also be done through a comprehensive study of attitudes towards mixing and intermarriage. While different words are used, there are often more similarities than differences. In terms of attitude towards intermarriage, white European-American families in the USA, white German families in Germany, white Australian families in Australia and white Afrikaan families in South Africa use similar discourses when discussing why they would not prefer their child to marry a particular group.¹ The language they use may differ – race versus culture/ethnicity versus citizenship – and the groups who are 'unmarriageable' may change, but the sentiment is the same. At the same time, these studies must consider

the different groups involved and the varied histories of forced contact, slavery, colonialism, settler societies, militarisation and immigration, as well as the different accompanying ideological approaches to dealing with Others and when and if mixing and mixed-ness is acknowledged and what privilege or problems it brings. What are factors that shape preference using an institutional analysis so these attitudes are understood within the context that people live and love. Looking at attitudes towards mixed relationships and families help expose larger issues of racialised beliefs about groups and the problematic tendency to blame inequality on personal failures (laziness, criminality, promiscuity) rather than institutional treatment. Moving towards a Global Mixed Studies framework may seem daunting but looking at a map of our contemporary world, it is the only place to go.

Note

- [1] Based on qualitative data collected from 2009-present; from an ongoing unpublished study on attitudes towards intermarriage in sixteen countries.

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Reviews

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