Mixed-Race Women and Epistemologies of Belonging

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How is it that people know when they belong and to what they belong? This question, about the epistemology of belonging, carries a particular complexity for mixed-race women. How is it that mixed-race women create a sense of identification with others? What are the unities and disjunctures? What can we understand about epistemologies of belonging through examining how mixed-race women create belonging? Through qualitative work based on the life stories of women of mixed heritage, in this paper I examine how the navigation of hybridity, as it is experienced in the lives of six “hybrid” mixed-race women, illuminates the complexities of identity construction and epistemologies of belonging.1 I use the term epistemology to signify the nature of knowledge, how we come to know things, in this case knowledge, or knowing, related to belonging. Belonging in human relations is connected to identity, both self-identification and identification with others.

Stuart Hall argues that identities are constituted discursively. He states:

I use “identity” to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to “interpellate”, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be “spoken”. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us.2

He contends that because identities are constructed through discourse, they are strategic, positional, multiple, intersecting and antagonistic, and increasingly fragmented and fractured.3 Identities as “points of temporary attachment” are thus fluid yet bound by discourses and practices, both our own and those of other people. This point is particularly salient for mixed-race women who are often hailed, and thus identify, in a variety of ways. Identification
with particular subjectivities related to race, nonetheless, creates or severs opportunities for belonging; these notions of belonging are further complicated by gender role expectations related to, for example, heteronormative assumptions of dating and parenting. These women’s stories of (dis)identification disrupt essentialized notions of family, reveal oppressive patriarchal norms, overtly destabilize constructions of fixed racial categories, and highlight epistemologies of belonging and exclusion.

Wanting to collect the stories of mixed-race women for a research project, I hailed participants with a flier that contained images of popular mixed women—Alicia Keys, Norah Jones, Halle Berry, and Shakira—and large bold letters across the top asking, “Are you a woman of mixed heritage?” Although I am most interested in the stories of women who are mixed white and “of color” for that study, my desire was to find people of mixed heritage, ethnicity, or race who are at least part “of color” and not limit the project population to distinctly white/of color biracial women.

The federal government defines five racial categories: “American Indian or Alaska Native,” “Asian,” “Black or African American,” “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander,” and “White.” To use the term *mixed race* to describe my project would have technically excluded Latinos. Although by government delineation Latino is not considered a race, Latinos often view themselves and are treated as peoples from a distinct racial category, and as such I wanted to include mixed Latinos.

I advertised primarily through university electronic mailing lists at a large public southeastern institution. The fliers were sent to all the campus lists for students of color as well as the Campus Y list. I decided I would see who stepped forward and have that determine my participant selection. The response was immediate; the day the fliers were posted through the electronic mailing lists, I began to receive e-mails from women interested in participating. I responded to everyone who expressed interest. The voices of six women are included in this project: Annie, Bobbie, Martha, Brianna, Alexis, and Dalia. To gather data, I conducted individual interviews with each of the participants and held two focus groups. I transcribed all the interviews and focus group discussions. All the women but Dalia (she had to leave town for an emergency) participated in the first focus group; Annie, Bobbie, Martha, and Alexis participated in the second focus group. These participants do not represent “the” mixed-race experience, but they offer representations of mixed-race experiences of young women in college (one participant is a graduate student) through firsthand accounts.

In this paper I examine the participants’ stories with a particular focus on
race through the framework of writings about epistemologies of belonging and diaspora. This work is also situated within a growing body of interdisciplinary literature related to mixed-race issues. With the exception of the 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa (which has now gained recognition as an academic text but at that time was not considered as such), the first academic book dedicated specifically to issues of mixed race, *Racially Mixed People in America* by Maria P. P. Root, did not appear until 1992.8

Now several writings dedicated to the topic of multiraciality cover a variety of disciplines, genres, and topics. There are texts and essays dedicated to viewpoints and laws on interracial marriages and families, books that look specifically at the experience of racial identity formation among black/white biracial youth and adults, interdisciplinary anthologies related to various aspects of mixed-race issues, and writings that examine the social construction of race as it relates to mixed-race identity.9 In addition, a growing number of narratives by multiracial individuals or about the mixed-race experience have been published.10

Jayne Ifekwunigwe argues that “‘Mixed Race’ Studies is one of the fastest growing, as well as one of the most important and controversial areas in the field of ‘race’ and ethnic relations.”11 Indeed, since her declaration, several articles and books have been published that examine the topic of multiraciality and mixed-race issues from a variety of angles. A series of investigations and debates have focused on how the multiracial movement began and who it most influenced and why.12 An interrelated strand of research has also continued about the politics of mixed-race identity development.13 Many of these writings grapple with the complexity of how (and for some if) we can discuss mixed race without reifying race. I approach this work from the perspective that race is socially constructed, yet it is real in its consequences. Thus at the risk of reifying race, it seems important to be able to discuss the consequences of the construction of (mixed) race, which we cannot do without naming it.

Thus, here I add to the growing conversation on mixed-race issues. I use my participants’ experiences to examine issues of belonging through a distinct lens with a focus on the work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and Judith Butler. This work adds also to conversations within women’s and gender studies that focus on identity politics and belonging related to race. I acknowledge that all our social identities are interrelated; race, class, gender, sexuality, and other social positionalities intersect. All of these come into play related to epistemologies of belonging. Within these stories, given that the topic of (mixed) race was the focus, the women’s answers focused predominantly on the impact and meaning of race and race-based culture in their lives. At the
time of the interviews, all of the women had a heterosexual orientation; in discussions of dating, offspring, and marriage, it became clear that each participant was invested in getting married and having children. It was within these discussions that gender issues and roles arose as prominent in epistemologies of belonging.

All of the women described themselves through their parents. Instead of saying “I am . . . ,” they would say, “My mother is . . . and my father is . . . ,” adding information about adoptive parents or stepparents as their particular situation warranted. Following are quotes of brief descriptions of the six participants; note how each of them describes herself through her parents.

annie: I’m nineteen. I am a sophomore. I’m from a big city in North Carolina but not the biggest big city. My mom is Filipino. My dad is Caucasian, white, Scotch-Irish, but you know, it’s not as big of a identity factor. And my mom is actually, I tell people she’s a mail-order bride, but, uhm, it’s not strictly true.14

bobbie: I’m twenty-three. I’m a senior. I grew up in a small farming community in eastern North Carolina. And my mom’s from Philadelphia, and she’s African American, and my dad is from Atlanta, he’s white. There’s some Native American blood back in there too, but I mostly identify as black and white.

martha: I am a twenty-seven-year-old PhD student. I was born and raised in Tempe, Arizona. . . . My mom is white; I guess German would be her ancestry. My dad had a family of eleven and my mom had a family of three. She has only sisters. My father would identify himself as, I guess, Mexican American. It’s interesting. He’s kind of sensitive. When we were kids, and when they ask you what your race is, he would say, “the human race.” He didn’t like those labels put on him.

brianna: I’m twenty years old. I was originally born in Mississippi. I lived in Durham all my life. I was adopted as a newborn child. My birth mother was 100 percent Native American, and I was adopted off the Choctaw reservation. It’s believed that my father is predominantly African American, but on both sides there’s some, I suppose, European blood accounting for my little freckles I get in the sun. Uhm, my dad is Jewish. He’s from Minnesota; I guess he’s Russian and Polish Jewish. And my mom is Irish Catholic from New York.

alexis: I’m twenty-two years old, and I currently work on campus. I graduated in May ’03. . . . About me in general, my mom is Mexican
American. She was born in Illinois, and my great grandparents came from Mexico, and my dad is African American. He was raised in the Bronx. But then they got divorced when I was two. And then my mom got remarried to my stepdad, who is white, and that was when I was four. And that’s really who raised me, my mom and my stepdad.

Dalia: I’m twenty years old. My father is Cameroonian from Cameroon, West Africa. My mother is Russian. Uhm, I was born in Russia, and then I moved to Cameroon when I was four, I think, and went to kindergarten and first grade there. And then we moved to Canada when I was six, and I lived in Canada until the tenth grade, but somewhere in between, for two years of middle school, I went back to Cameroon to go to boarding school. So, like, it’s been very interesting.

These are self-descriptions given by the participants; however, these women define themselves in various ways in relation to race or ethnicity. Descriptions can allude to self-definitions, but it is important to remember that descriptions are always partial, and related definitions may shift. Supporting Hall’s notion of identity as temporary attachments to subject positions, for several of these women, how they defined themselves racially or ethnically varied both situationally and over time. These women sometimes identified with all their heritages and at other times with only one heritage. The self-identifications sometimes came about as a result of others’ perceptions of them but at other times ran contrary to others’ perceptions. They were also strategic in relation to schooling and associated benefits.

Of all the women, Brianna, who is the biological daughter of a Choctaw woman and African American man but was raised by a Russian Polish Jewish father and Irish Catholic mother, most strongly identified with the term “mixed” rather than her specific heritages. She was also the participant most often asked the question “What are you?” by others (at least twice a day), thus being hailed as ethnically ambiguous. When asked that question, she typically simply responds, “I’m mixed.” However, on forms for school and the census, she identified herself as “Native American”; she is the recipient of a Native American scholarship, which she feels she should not be excluded from just because she is adopted. She justifies her action of labeling herself as Native American even as she discursively disidentifies with that category, contradictorily stating,

I put Native American on the school things, but like I’m mixed but for, I guess for statistics reasons, there’s no Native Americans so I’ll add to the statistics a little bit. I don’t know if now you can put two races on the
census, or the things. I know you can on the census, but even then like if you put you’re two or more races, you’re just a blank because it doesn’t really say anything, you’re just two or more races or something. So I think, well, I might as well put Native American because that’s one thing. I usually do Native American because they are such a minority that I just want one more to be counted [emphasis mine].

Aside from representing Native Americans on official forms, however, she says, “day to day, I’m just mixed.”

Brianna’s attachment to a Native American subject position can be viewed as temporary and situational. The description of herself as Native American maintains a merely descriptive status. There is no suturing to the subject position, as can be inferred by her use of the pronoun “they.” Even as she claims (at least on paper) to be Native American, in the next discursive move she dis-identifies with the group by avoiding the term “we” and consequently labeling Native Americans as people different from herself.

Hall argues:

The notion of effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is ‘hailed,’ but that the subject invests in the position, which means that the suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places identification, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda.15

In the case of Brianna, she is hailed both as mixed and as Native American, and although she may use both of those categorizations to describe herself, she is not invested in a Native American identity but rather identifies strongly as mixed in her everyday life, thus suturing her subject-position as a mixed-race woman.

As can be concluded from this example, Hall reminds us that “the question, and the theorization, of identity is a matter of considerable political significance.”16 What are the politics in claiming a Native American scholarship when a person does not culturally identify as such but has a strong biological connection? This conflict raises larger questions about racial identity formation and belonging. How is it that race is constituted? If race is a social construct, which I and many others would argue it is, then is culture of primary importance?17 Who defines culture, and how is it that culture becomes associated with race? On the surface, one might listen to Brianna’s description and believe that her only reason to claim a Native American identity is to gain systematic privileges. However, upon further dialogue with Brianna, I found that her struggle with belonging in relation to her Native American identity
was much deeper and complex than her positioning in relation to a race-based scholarship. In the middle of a story Brianna shared about getting asked “what are you?” by a store clerk, she mentioned in passing that she had taken a trip to the Choctaw reservation the previous summer to visit her birth mom. To follow up on her comment, I asked her specifically, “So visiting your birth mom, what was that like?” She seemed hesitant to talk about it, stating that she didn’t want to be in her birth mom’s life as much as she wanted to know what she was like. She described the experience as “weird,” and through her description it became clear that Brianna went in search of identification with someone whom she assumed would be like her. Brianna was disappointed to find that she did not bear physical resemblance to her mom or her half-siblings and that her family did not match her media-acquired perception of Native Americans. In response to my prompt, “So you didn’t look like your birth mom?” she said,

I didn’t think so at all. She didn’t really look, like, Native American to me. She looks, like, Arabic, I guess. Maybe that’s why I get that so much. She didn’t look like, she didn’t have a full face, like you saw, you know, on Northern Exposure or anything, like she has a very European-looking self.

There was no direct identification and thus no sense of belonging for her to her family or even to her previously held notions about what it meant to be Native American.

In another discussion of belonging, Brianna mentioned how she “never felt comfortable” around the historically white fraternity on her college campus. She stated,

I always feel like the little mulatto house slave or something like that. I just never feel really comfortable there. I do have white friends, but I’m very selective ’cuz I just have to make sure that people are okay with someone being mixed and they don’t have anything against the possibility of maybe dating somebody outside of their race themselves, you know.

In this instance, one can see the impact of the combination of race and gender in notions of belonging. The invocation of the image of the “little mulatto house slave” carries implications of gendered positioning, given the use of the term “little” and the fact that historically most house slaves have been women. The term “slave,” of course, implies race and racism here. Added to this are Brianna’s fears about whether her dating choices will be accepted by those around her. As a multiracial woman, she has no choice but to date “outside of her race” to some extent. Expectations about dating, self-imposed and externally imposed, exposed complicated epistemologies of belonging.
Brianna’s described identity changed situationally, while the self-identifications of other participants changed over time. These self-identifications were related to a variety of factors, including perceptions by friends and family and a growing awareness of the implications of their choices both personally and politically. Bobbie, who stated that she is perceived by others in different ways, from a tan white woman to a minority, transitioned from identifying primarily as African American to identifying as mixed. She explained,

I used to just put African American, and I think I even had a logic worked out like that, like since my mom’s black, like if I’d been born 150 years ago, I’d been a slave regardless of what my father was, so. But now I always say mixed because I feel like it’s disrespectful to my father and that side of who I am to say anything else.

Bobbie’s desire to explicitly claim a connection to her father as well as her mother inspired a shift in identity claim.

Dalia has recently begun to shift her racial self-identification as a result of peer influence and politics. Of all the participants, Dalia possessed the strongest connection to both of her parents’ cultures and primarily identified herself as mixed Cameroonian and Russian. She stated,

I always avoided the term African American. I always told people that I’m mixed, I’m Russian and Cameroonian, because I didn’t identify with being African American, and I also didn’t really identify with like the issues that came around that.

However, her sense of racial identity was changing, recent to the interviews; she said, “since I’ve gotten to college I’ve identified more with the African American community because I don’t have a choice because in America you’re black.” She explains that she’s learned from “radical” friends that if she is going to be discriminated against, it will be because she is black. As she spends more time with the African American community, she identifies with it more, although she still feels she brings an “outsider’s” perspective to it. She also identifies herself as black for her university scholarship, which she feels she deserves because “everyone’s perception” of her is black. Although, she admits that in winter, when her tan fades, people ask her if she is mixed.

Returning to Hall’s notion of suturing subject positions through identification, it is possible to see from the participant’s descriptions that mixed-race women are often hailed into multiple racial positionings. How the mixed-race women participants responded to that hailing depended on a variety of political and personal factors. The responses were situational, and varying identities were constructed discursively. As mixed-race women succumb to, or
consciously counteract, racial hailing, their sense of belonging shifts as they define themselves as insider or outsider social subjects of particular racial or ethnic discourses.

Mixed-race women’s experiences cannot be separated from the history of race and gender politics and contemporary racial debates. The history of hybridity is one in which bodies of mixed-race people have been observed, theorized about, and used as evidence in racial power debates, but their individual experiences are often disregarded. Women of mixed heritage, mixed white and “of color,” are caught in these politically charged, race-based controversies. Given general heteronormative assumptions, as women, and thus as people who can potentially bear offspring and who are expected to assume primary responsibility for raising children in a patriarchal culture, mixed-race women occupy a particularly charged social position. No matter what path a mixed-race woman chooses, she can be perceived as a traitor to both whites and people of color—a traitor to either side of her family, a traitor to equity, a traitor to cultural preservation, and a traitor to cultural purity.

All of the women thought through the implications of the race of the men they dated, both for how they would be perceived by others and, if they were to marry and have kids, what it would mean for their children’s sense of identiﬁcation and belonging. Bobbie, for example, stated in reference to dating and race,

[It’s] not so much that I’m like, well, my husband needs to be white or needs to be black, but just that you know what you gain and lose in that. Despite the fact that I am the offspring of an interracial couple, I still have that black sense that it’s kinda wrong that all these white women are stealing all the good black men (laughing nervously) and things like that. I get up in arms sometimes about people dating interracially if I feel like they’re doing it to dabble in another culture, uhm, and because they seriously aren’t interested in who that is for who they are and aren’t seriously committed to like finding out that.

It is clear why she is concerned about this as she later makes the statement,

I don’t like somebody [black] dating me ’cuz I’m light-skinned. I’m always like, “man I wish I was a little bit darker.” I wish that, uhm, my hair was a little nappier. I got really sick, in high school, of people telling me that I have good hair, which is just a term that I find just horribly offensive.

Putting these two statements together, Bobbie is caught somewhere in the middle of racial and gender politics, unable to find where she belongs. She is con-
cerned about white women “stealing” black men, yet wonders about her positionality as a light-skinned mixed woman; the unstated question it seems is “Am I stealing black men from darker-skinned women?” The politics operating are numerous. What does it mean for women to be positioned as “stealing” men? What are the gender politics involved in the debates about “good hair”? How can a mixed-race woman invested in dating men (we could further break down the politics about the assumptions of heteronormitivity) make sense of it all? Bobbie was told by a professor that “everything we do as black people is political.” She knows there are “implications for interracial dating . . . that white people just don’t recognize.” She is left wondering what to do:

There are times when I think, you know, I don’t want to date a white person who’s not going to be aware of those things and live in a little bubble world that doesn’t recognize, you know, where minorities are at. And then I’ve even thought on the other extreme, well I don’t want to date a black man just because I would feel like he was dating me just because I was light skinned.

Additionally she is aware of the implications as a mixed-race woman specifically. She says, “I hate falling into that sort of like, confused, the tragic mulatto kind of role. I don’t want it to be that big of an issue for me or for anybody else.”

In this instance race, gender, and sexuality politics collide, leaving Bobbie feeling there is no place of belonging yet simultaneously not wanting to admit this for fear of adding to the stereotype of the “tragic mulatto,” historically most often women, who were portrayed as depressed, self-loathing, pitied, or despised.

Paul Gilroy argues that racial identity matters politically. Identity has been a powerful historical mobilizing force that “marks out the divisions and subsets in our social lives and helps to define the boundaries between our uneven, local attempts to make sense of the world.”

Throughout history and in continuing nationalist debates today “the power of absolute identities is summoned up.” Through the reductionist lens of “pure” identity “otherness can only be a threat.” This otherness is embodied by mixed-race women who are left to navigate their identities in a sea of politics that tends toward the power and “stability” of promoting sameness. Gilroy writes,

when national and ethnic identities are represented and projected as pure, exposure to difference threatens them with dilution and compromises their prized purities with the ever-present possibility of contamination. . . . Different peoples are certainly hated and feared, but the timely antipathy against them is nothing compared with the hatred turned toward the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar. To have mixed is to have been party to a great betrayal.
Mixed-race people’s lives are embedded in this sentiment in which our existence can be perceived “with hatred” as “contamination.” Although many of the participants might not consciously view themselves as caught in such an adversarial political system, as described by Gilroy, the politics of the fear and hatred of the “partially different” were manifested in these women’s lives through personal interactions, often among extended family members.

Because of racial prejudice, many of the women experienced estrangement from extended family. Bobbie was estranged from her father’s side of the family because they were not happy about his marriage to an African American woman. As a result, she did not get to know that side of the family well. Alexis was estranged from her mother’s side of the family because they disapproved of her marrying an African American man. Consequently they did not acknowledge Alexis for the first two years of her life. Martha was estranged from her father’s side of the family because, as she said, he had many “black marks” against him:

My dad married outside of his race, which was seen as black mark number one. He married a woman who would not convert to Catholicism, which is black mark number two. And the most important key factor was that they couldn’t have children that were their own.

As a result, although her father’s family was only a few hours away, they rarely spent time with them, and she missed out on most of his family’s big gatherings. Similarly, Brianna was not close to her grandparents on her mother’s side because they “weren’t too happy about [her parents] having a nonwhite child or even adopting.” These women were the products of “the great betrayal” to which Gilroy refers and often suffered estrangement as a result.

This sense of feeling different was either exacerbated or mediated by relationships with siblings or cousins. Martha and Annie had stories about being different from their cousins. Martha, who has no mixed cousins, told a story of visiting her grandmother’s house where her brother was told he wasn’t a “real cousin” because he is brown. Annie also described a recent experience of going to visit an estranged cousin from her white father’s side of the family and finding that they marked her as different, as evidenced by incorrect assumptions they made about her based on her mom being Filipino (for example, that she ate rice for breakfast). Although Brianna and Dalia are different from their cousins, they explained why they never felt they were different. Brianna explained that she has both adopted and mixed cousins, thus, she did not stand out. She stated “the Jewish family, they never like treated me as different, like, it’s just I was just part of the family always.” Dalia emphasized the importance of her mom earning the respect of her father’s family in Camer-
oon by wearing traditional clothes, cooking Cameroonian food, participating in events, and developing good relationships with the women in the family. She stated, “[My mom] has integrated herself into that community, so they very much respect her, and therefore, we as her kids and my dad’s kids are not treated differently than any other Cameroonian kids.” She added that she can speak Russian and “so with my mom’s family, it’s the same way . . . like I just never felt different.” Dalia was accepted by both sides of the family and never felt like an outsider. The women, as described above, experienced varying levels of belonging based on connection and estrangement from extended family members, which was largely dependent upon perceived otherness.

Alexis and Bobbie did not mention cousins, but they both emphasized the importance of their siblings in their lives. Bobbie said, “When I am with my siblings I am not having to choose”; she belongs. Not wanting to be associated with the “tragic mulatto” stereotype, her siblings provided a safe space for her to share her conflicting feelings. Although Alexis and her sister have different fathers—Alexis’s father is black and her sister Tammy’s father is white—having a Mexican mother makes them both mixed. When I asked Alexis about her siblings, she said, “Tammy, she’s my heart.” She explained that although they have fathers of different races, they look similar, “just different shades of brown.” Alexis noted how a person once commented that she and her sister were “each other’s people,” meaning mixed people. Dalia did not discuss being either close to or distant from her brothers. Martha felt very different from her brother because although Martha’s brother looks darker than she does, he considers himself white and makes derogatory comments against people of color. As a result they argue often, and she does not connect with him.

In his discussion of the complex politics of identification, difference, and sameness, Gilroy reminds us that “differences can be found within identities as well as between them.” Gilroy is discussing identity in relation to larger concepts of social and political solidarity, yet the implications of these concepts can be examined as the identity politics play out in the individual lives of mixed-race women. For example, Bobbie’s awareness of the tragic mulatto stereotype affects how she defines herself publicly and with whom she seeks connection; she found comfort and safety with her siblings. Yet, as Martha’s experience reveals, connection by virtue of being mixed does not necessarily create the comfort and safety of shared experiences and perspectives, as we are each distinctly influenced by the larger politics of the world in which we live.

Powerful stories were shared by two participants about how they were made to feel different from their families by outsiders. Alexis was told stories by her mom and sister of how others would stare in disbelief when they pointed to
Alexis (when she was playing a sport on stage for an event) and claimed she was a part of their family. The story she remembers most strongly she experienced directly:

We were at the mall at one of the kiosks and we were going to get ice cream and my sister ordered and my dad ordered and then I went to order and the man was like, “I’m helping this family right now.” He thought that I was like butting in or something. And my mom was just like, “She is a part of this family.” And he was very apologetic, and you know I don’t think he meant anything by it, but still, the way he snapped at me in the first place and what he insinuated.

Brianna also shared stories of people making assumptions about her relationship to her parents. Because Brianna is adopted, these stories are distinct. She explained that when she was with her mom, “the white ladies would look at her [mom] like really unhappy with a little brown child next to her.” Brianna recognized the prejudice stemming from people assuming that her mom must be with a black man and disapproving of the interracial union. Surprisingly, the other participants did not share stories of being perceived as different from their parents.

Gilroy invokes the concept of “diaspora” as “a ready alternative to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging.” Diaspora disrupts the idea that people within nations naturally share identity. Gilroy states, “as an alternative to the metaphysics of ‘race,’ nation and bounded culture coded into the body, diaspora is a concept that problematizes the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging.” The experiences of mixed-race women also disrupt the notions of belonging. Just as the idea of “homeland” is often summoned in the politics of belonging, the concept of family is often invoked as the group with which each of us can find a sense of belonging. The complexity of interracial families disrupts the notion of instant familial affinity and understanding. Rather than belonging, mixed-race women can feel a sense of dissonance from one or both parents and extended families.

Two of the women, Martha and Annie, told stories of their white parent feeling threatened by the ways in which they are exploring their identities of color and becoming more involved with communities of color. Martha was concentrating on Latino issues in graduate school; she explained, “my mom’s very threatened by me wanting to develop this Latino side; she’s very threatened because she feels like it’s a denial of my white side.” Martha’s mom asked her why she wasn’t learning about her (white) culture. These were Martha’s thoughts in response to her mom’s question:
I’ve been learning about her culture my whole life, and now is a different point in my life, but I also wonder why does it threaten her so much? Why—does it make her think that I’m going to love her less because she is white, you know?

Nonetheless, there is a distance between them. Annie, reflecting upon Martha’s experience, stated,

I can really relate to what you were saying about your mom feeling threatened because I could use almost the exact same terminology with my dad. And he hasn’t spoken to me about it, but he speaks to my mom, saying things like, “make sure she doesn’t forget where she comes from.”

Annie shared several stories of her dad being racist, explaining that he has “very prejudiced views about race” and “disapproves of [her] hanging out with black friends.” Given that he felt entitled to find Annie’s mom through a mail service and pay her ticket so that she could marry him just three days after her arrival in the United States, his feelings of superiority are not surprising. Annie, wanting to avoid confrontation with her racist father, often uses her mom as an intermediary, avoiding direct conversation with him. Consequently, Annie’s Filipino mom ends up telling Annie, ironically, not to forget that she is white.

All of these stories—of estrangement from family, feelings of difference or connection with siblings and cousins, being made to feel different by outsiders, and dealing with a threatened parent—reveal the intricacies of the epistemologies of belonging as mixed, and adopted, women within their own families. Gilroy argues that, “though still contested, diaspora lends itself to the critique of absolutist political sensibilities, especially those that have been articulated around the themes of nation, ‘race,’ and ethnicity.”26 The experiences of mixed-race women also lend themselves to the critique of racial and ethnic purity and sameness. Mixed-race experiences demonstrate the complexities inherent in epistemologies of belonging.

Gilroy ends his chapter “Identity and Belonging” with a discussion of Bob Marley and how his life and work, and the reaction of others to him, serves as a “study of postmodern diasporic identity.”27 Gilroy argues that Marley’s transnational image invites one further round of speculation about the status of identity and the conflicting scales on which sameness, subjectivity and solidarity can be imagined . . . recognizing this requires moving the focus of inquiry away from notions of fixed identity that we have already discovered to be worn out and placing it instead upon the processes of identification.28
Here Gilroy’s emphasis on the process of identification aligns with Hall’s emphasis on discursive identity formation, both of which dismiss the idea of essential identities. Marley and his work were marketed such that he became a global, transnational figure. Gilroy raises questions about what it is that creates people’s connections to Marley. Marley, who became identified as a Jamaican, a Caribbean, and African, and a Pan-African artist, was also the son of a wealthy white father, a “long ignored figure” in Bob Marley’s life. Upon invoking the image of Bob Marley’s white dad, Gilroy states, “perhaps, in the tainted but nonetheless powerful image of Bob Marley’s global stardom, we can discern the power of identity based, not on some cheap, pre-given sameness, but on will, inclination, mood, and affinity.” This discussion of Marley raises questions about the epistemologies of belonging for mixed-race people. Is identity and belonging based on “will, inclination, mood, and affinity,” as Gilroy suggests? It would seem that this would be too easy an answer that dismisses the politics of power. This assertion appears to place the agency of belonging on the individual who wishes to belong. The politics of belonging encompass a much more complex, dialectical relationship between those who wish to belong and those who have the power to sanction or dismiss belonging.

If one performs belonging, say through “will, inclination, mood, and affinity” among other venues, does one belong? In Bodies That Matter, Judith Butler examines the relationship between the materiality of the body and the performativity of identity, particularly gender identification. Butler argues that indeed, it is unclear that there can be an “I” or a “we” who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the “I” neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.

Thus, in Butler’s conception, gender identity formation cannot be based solely on the agency of an individual. Gilroy asked if we could “discern the power of identity” based on “will.” Butler asserts that “gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all willing first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition.” Butler reminds us that an examination of agency and subject positioning requires an acknowledgement and attendance to “the conditions of its emergence and operation.” We can apply this, for instance, to Brianna’s assertion that among the white fraternity she feels like a “mulatto house slave.” It is the conditions of
her surroundings—what the white fraternity represents and how those within it treat her—that create that particular kind of subject position and allow for certain agency, in this case her ability to decide not to emerge herself in such surroundings.

Although Butler is speaking specifically about the formation of a gendered subject, her framework might be applied to the formation of a racialized subject. I would argue that, as with gender formation, the “I” emerges within a matrix of race relations. In fact, the “I” is constituted through the combination of gender and race relations (as well as other social categories such as social status) and the interrelations of the power politics between and among each category as evidenced by Bobbie’s thoughts on interracial dating. Butler explains that, “construction not only takes place in time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration.”33 The same could be argued of race. The construction of race is also temporal and operates though the reiteration of norms. Yet, as Butler aptly points out, the reiterative practices not only produce a “naturalized effect” but simultaneously expose “gaps and fissures . . . that which escapes or exceeds the norm.”34 The mere existence of people of mixed heritage destabilizes the production of race-based identities. The choices of belonging can further destabilize such gender and race-based identities. Anzaldúa argues that “the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed” and asks the question, “which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?”35 Here an emphasis is placed on the potential connection based on shared gender between mother and daughter and the disruption in belonging created by racial differences made apparent through distinct skin colors.

For women of mixed heritage to claim particular identities, questions about what constitutes “legitimate” identities must be asked. For example, what constitutes black identity? Is it skin color and phenotype? Does one have to “appear black” to claim a black identity? If so, who decides what black looks like? Can black identity be formed and claimed through culture, and if so what is black culture? These questions arise as multiracial women who are part black define and explain their racial identification. An example of this can be found in the description by Bobbie, in a group interview, of how she sees herself in relation to white and black cultures. Bobbie said, “I was definitely raised in a white world.” She elaborated that she was raised in a small, tightly knit, all-white (except for her mom and siblings) farming community. Yet she was exposed to what she describes as “more traditional” African American culture by her mom. She explains that the traditional African American culture includes “the sort of things that maybe in the white world would be considered...
high culture, like arts, and you know, older music and things like this.” Bobbie’s mother is a storyteller, and one of the few black actors where they lived, and she introduced her to some African American folklore, but Bobbie felt she hadn’t been exposed to “current African American culture.” She said,

like hip-hop, I didn’t get into [it] until much later when my brother went off to college and started getting into it, uhm, like you know, or like styles or movies and things like this. People still get mad at me because I didn’t see *The Color Purple*, and I didn’t watch *Fresh Prince*.

After Bobbie made this statement, one of the other women in the group, Alexis, who is part black, confirmed Bobbie’s assertion (that she gets challenged for her lack of cultural knowledge) by exclaiming that people say to her, “You didn’t watch *Fresh Prince*? Everyone watched that!”

Through explicit discussions of what it means to belong to a race-based culture, mixed-race women define and reify race cultures and exemplify the complexity of defining culture based on one factor, such as race, because cultures are created through intersecting identities, such as race and class and age and gender. Bobbie explained that she didn’t listen to mainstream hip-hop or watch TV, but she said, “there are definitely aspects of the African American community that I identify with completely and wholly.” She did not elaborate on what those aspects entail. Through Bobbie’s comments we get a sense of what, in her mind, defines “current” black culture—hip hop, certain TV shows, and movies. They are all forms of entertainment to which black people, by her description, are expected to be more attracted. One of the questions that comes to mind is how bound are those expectations to socioeconomic status and age? Would a fifty-year-old, middle-class black woman be expected to watch *Fresh Prince* and listen to hip-hop?

In the focus group, echoing the comments Bobbie made about articulating issues of belonging to white and black cultures, Martha contributed to the discussion with her own story of how she grapples with what it means to try to be Latina as a mixed person. Martha said,

I guess if I think about it, I am into Latino high culture as well. But I think in some ways I wouldn’t ever think twice about going to the *pulgas* or flea markets in Durham. To me it is also a socioeconomic thing [lots of yeah-yehs from the group]. So I wouldn’t try to sell myself as one of them, like I’m from The People—Those Latinos, my life hasn’t been like theirs. What I would think of as like really more like the mass Latino culture so, so I guess maybe I’m a bourgeois Latino too. I guess, yeah, but I don’t know how you, that’s a hard thing I think as a mixed person. I
mean, I bet this came up for all of you in your interviews, but for me like, how, how Latino do I have to be? What counts and what doesn’t? You know, like will the real Mexican please stand up? Like what, I don’t know and is it just never going to be enough because I am mixed or is there going to be a space where I’m just going to be like, “that’s okay”?

In their longing to belong, Bobbie and Martha simultaneously challenge and reify cultural ways of being that are identified as belonging to particular races of people. Through their descriptions of what it means to belong to a particular race, they destabilize racial categories as they call into question the nature of culture and assumptions about race. The overall validity of what defines racial cultures, such as Latino/a and black cultures, is challenged. This challenge to racial categorical identification can then be further examined beyond mixed-race issues by asking if any of these racial categories work for anyone. If someone who is black but not (as far as they know) mixed does not watch *Fresh Prince* or listen to hip-hop, are they not part of current black culture? If someone Latino does not frequent flea markets, are they not part of “The People”? The tenuousness, and perhaps absurdity, with which we define culture related to race, becomes exposed through these women’s stories.

Through a discussion of African diaspora, Tina Campt, in the final chapter of her book *Other Germans*, raises similar questions about race and belonging. As an African American interviewing Afro-Germans, Campt found that often the interviewees turned the focus on her. In relation to those interactions, she states that “these unexpected exchanges were moments when I became aware of gaps of translation and moments of interpellulation between us, as well as how we actively produced black identity in our dialogues.” Campt explains that her informants repeatedly and specifically articulated assumptions of “similarities and commonalities as black people while always emphatically insisting on the specificity of our culturally distinct experiences of race in our respective societies.” Those moments of “eruptions/interruptions,” which Campt labels “intercultural address,” illuminate “tensions in diasporic relations.” These tensions mirror the ways in which my mixed-race participants, in discussions of belonging to specific racial groups, exposed gaps and fissures in how culture gets defined. Just as Campt’s work raised questions about affinities, commonalities, and fissures in the African diaspora, the mixed-race women’s stories raised questions about the unities and disparities between people of a particular race or ethnicity, even when living within the same country. In other words, the experience of mixed-race women in relation to epistemologies of belonging runs parallel to some of the descriptions of epistemologies of belonging as they are experienced by diasporic peoples.
Campt found that her black German informants assumed both commonalities and differences in relation to her. Reflecting upon an interview, Campt describes how these assumptions were unsettling:

Was my blackness assumed as a basis of empathy? Solidarity? Identification? An essential commonality and capacity to understand his experiences? More important, I was far more daunted by my uncertainty that I could live up to any of the expectations that I imagined his remarks to imply.39

This fear of living up to expectations was one of the threads woven through the stories by the women of mixed heritage. Many of them are asking, How Latino, black, Asian, ... (fill in the blank depending upon the mixed heritages) do I need to be? To answer that question they have to attempt to define that which is difficult to define; they must answer the question, What does it mean to be Latino, black, Asian, ...? More specifically, they are asking, What does it mean to be a Latina, a black woman, an Asian woman, ...?

The irony is that each time mixed-race women ask and attempt to answer these questions, they are, in effect, helping to define and redefine race and gender because, returning to the ideas of Stuart Hall, identities are created through discourse. Campt argues that the tensions within the African diaspora, “urge us to consider the extent to which such relations are actively constituted at multiple levels in our cross-cultural dialogues.”40 Just as relations between people are constituted through dialogue, so are relationships to particular cultures. I would argue that it is not merely the relationship to culture that is constituted but that the formation of culture is constituted through dialogue as well.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have considered the ways in which the stories I have collected from women of mixed heritage intersect with writings about epistemologies of belonging and diaspora. Using the work of Stuart Hall as a starting point, I situated the analysis within the framework of understanding identity as being constituted discursively. To believe that identities are created through discourse, it becomes imperative to examine how people talk about themselves and how they define themselves as belonging to or being excluded from certain groups. Thus this paper takes the words of my mixed-race participants and examines them in relation to particular writings about belonging and identity formation.

Paul Gilroy makes particular arguments that connect to the mixed-race
women’s stories. He, for example, argues that mixed people are hated and feared because they threaten purity. Although Gilroy makes this argument in reference to large political systems, one can see how that hatred and fear gets played out in individual mixed women’s lives through estrangement by family. Several of the women I interviewed experienced estrangement from family members who were unwilling to accept the interracial relationship of their parents or their existence as mixed-race children.

Gilroy challenges the idea that people naturally share an identity based on nation. Diaspora, he argues, “problematises the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging.” According to Gilroy, diaspora disrupts the idea that belonging is rooted in kinship. In the same way that diaspora disrupts notions of belonging based on nation, mixed-race experiences disrupt notions of belonging based on family and race. People within nations do not necessarily share identities by mere virtue of living in the same country, just as people within families may not automatically share identities as a result of being a part of the same family. Mixed-race women, struggling to identify and belong, may be disidentified from one or both parents, and their self-explorations of racial identity can feel threatening to a parent who may not be of the same race with which their child chooses to primarily identify. Discussions of diaspora open doors to critique themes of nation, race, and ethnicity; the experiences of mixed-race women similarly provide critiques of racial and ethnic belonging and call into question the implications of gender expectations as they intersect with race.

Gilroy ends his chapter with a discussion of Bob Marley, highlighting the fact that Marley put forth an image as black but had a white father who was not talked about. Marley’s mixed-race identity is used by Gilroy to argue that the power of identity is not based on sameness. Unfortunately, Gilroy explains the basis of identity and belonging through a conception of “will and affinity” that disregards the complex politics of power that exist in various relationships.

One way of thinking about how racialized subjects are formed is through Judith Butler’s framework of the formation of gendered subjects. In that conception, gender operates through a reiteration of norms and is temporal. If one thinks of race within that framework, then reiterative practices define raced subjects. However, those same practices also simultaneously define outliers to the norm. Mixed-race women often call into question the legitimacy of race-based identities. As they articulate how they do or do not belong to the specific racial or ethnic categories that they embody, their discourses actively define, reify, and disrupt race cultures. Through the mixed-race women’s stories that reveal their grappling with questions of belonging, the women
question the “nature” of culture, which in effect exposes assumptions about race and consequently destabilizes racial categories.

Tina Campt’s work on the African diaspora raises similar questions about race and belonging. Thinking about mixed-race women’s relations to race and belonging as paralleling diasporic people’s relations to belonging, Campt’s writing reminds us that race relations—and consequently racial categories—are continually defined, redefined, and disrupted through discourse. The same is true of gendered subject positioning and epistemologies of belonging related to gender; gender norms are continually defined, redefined, and disrupted through discourse, and they are situated within perceived “race-based” expectations.

Diaspora and mixed-race issues intersect. If there were no diaspora, mixed-race people would not exist. Although I was tempted to conceptualize a mixed-race diaspora, if the definition that “the foundational notion of diaspora is the forced dispersal or placement of people” is accepted, then mixed-race people do not easily fit into that conception because they may not all be defined as displaced by force. Instead of claiming a “mixed-race diaspora,” I have theorized about the ways in which mixed-race issues run parallel to, and intersect with, diaspora discourses. As can be noted in the comparisons described in this paper, many of the insights gained from discussing diaspora are similar to those that can be found by unpacking the stories of mixed-race women. Perhaps the key point is that discussions of belonging as related to mixed-race people, and diasporic people, destabilize racial categories.

In her work on geographies of race in black Liverpool, Jacqueline Nassy Brown reminds us that “diaspora must never be made synonymous with the project of unity—nor with origins, authenticity, difference, roots, routes, or hybridity. These terms just give voice to the discrepant desires and discontents of counter/parts.” Instead, diaspora can be viewed as “shifting relations of antagonism and affinity.” Mixed-race women’s multiple, strategic, antagonistic, and fragmented identities can also be viewed as such shifting relations. However, paying attention to the discrepant desires and discontents of mixed-race women help deepen our understanding of epistemologies of belonging.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this paper I will use the terms mixed race, mixed heritage, multiracial, and biracial interchangeably. These terms have been used in particular ways among various people to signify particular connections to causes and ideologies. My intent in using a variety of terms is to emphasize that I am referring to mixedness, and not focusing on one term to reify the idea that multiracials are a fixed group of


5. The fliers were initially distributed through electronic mailing lists on September 25, 2004. The fliers were posted that week and were left up for approximately three weeks. All participants who expressed interest and with whom I could coordinate schedules were included in the project. With some of the interested individuals, I could not coordinate schedules for this project. I asked these individuals if I could interview them for future work, and I later followed up with them. In total, nine people responded to the posting; six are included in this article, two were not interviewed because I could not coordinate schedules with them to conduct interviews, and one, although she was of mixed heritage, did not have a parent who was a person of color (both were of European heritage), thus she was not included in this project, given the stated parameters.

6. To protect participants’ confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout this article for people and places. All the participants signed written consent forms in which they agreed to allow me to directly quote their words.

7. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. They were conducted in locations convenient for the participants. The first focus group was 1.5 hours long; the second focus group was 1 hour and 50 minutes.

8. This deduction about the importance of Root’s book as a groundbreaking text is confirmed by David L. Brunsma, ed., *Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the “Color-Blind” Era* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2006).


14. This data was used in a previously written book chapter: Silvia Bettez, “Stories of Women of Mixed Heritage: The Importance of Culture,” in *Grappling with Diversity: Readings on Civil Rights Pedagogy and Critical Multiculturalism*, ed. Susan Schramm-Pate and Rhonda B. Jeffries (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 217–43. Some of the quotes are thus the same, but I engage in an entirely different analysis in this piece.


17. For discussions of race as a social construction, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the USA: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Rout-


20. Gilroy, Against Race, 103.
21. Gilroy, Against Race, 104.
22. Gilroy, Against Race, 104.
24. Gilroy, Against Race, 123.
25. Gilroy, Against Race, 123.
27. Gilroy, Against Race, 131.
28. Gilroy, Against Race, 132.
29. Gilroy, Against Race, 133.
31. Butler, Bodies, 7 (emphasis mine).
32. Butler, Bodies, 7.
33. Butler, Bodies, 10.
34. Butler, Bodies, 10.
35. Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 78.
37. Campt, Other Germans, 183.
38. Campt, Other Germans, 183.
39. Campt, Other Germans, 198.
40. Campt, Other Germans, 187.
41. Gilroy, Against Race, 123.
42. Campt, Other Germans, 171.
44. Brown, Dropping Anchor, 100.