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# Mixed-Race in the US and UK: Comparing the Past, Present, and Future

BY

**JENNIFER PATRICE SIMS**

*University of Alabama in Huntsville, US*

and

**CHINELO L. NJAKA**

*Peckham Rights! and Independent Social Researcher, UK*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Chinyere Ike, Gretha, and all the loved ones we lost along the way.



# Contents

List of Tables and Figures	<i>ix</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xi</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction: The Past, Present, and Future of Mixed-Race People in the United States and United Kingdom</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2 Creating Mixed-Race: The Census in the US and the UK</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Chapter 3 Black, British Asian, Mixed-Race, or Jedi: Mixed-Race Identity in the US and UK</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Chapter 4 Mixed-Race Civil Society: Racial Paradigms and Mixed-Race (Re)production in the US and UK</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Chapter 5 “Sometimes It’s the First Thing People Ask”: Daily Experiences of Mixedness in the US and UK</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Chapter 6 “Yes, Girl, Yes. I Want Babies”: Mixed-Race Families Generation After Generation</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Chapter 7 Queering Critical Mixed Race Studies</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Chapter 8 Conclusion: Creating and Comparing a Mixed-Race Future</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Methodological Appendix</b>	<b>109</b>
References	<i>131</i>
Index	<i>143</i>





# List of Tables and Figures

## Chapter 2

Figure 2.1.	Reproduction of the US Census Questions on Ethnicity and Race.	15
Figure 2.2.	Reproduction of the UK Census Questions on Ethnicity.	17

## Appendix

Table A1.	Profiles of Mixed-Race CSOs.	111
Table A2.	Dr Sims' Study 1 Sample Characteristics.	121



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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: The Past, Present, and Future of Mixed-Race People in the United States and United Kingdom

So, can I ask, where are you from?

Yeah, the United States.

Oh yeah? Whereabouts?

A state called Tennessee. It's in the south.

And your parents too?

My dad yes. My mom is from another southern state, South Carolina.

Hmm ... were they born there?

Um, yes ....

Ten years ago, London South Bank University and London School of Economics jointly hosted a series of one-day workshops on mixed-race scholarship in the UK. The above exchange took place between a UK-based attendee and the first author, who was a US PhD student at the time. It would take another couple of trips across the pond before the underlying meaning and theoretical significance of “Where are you from?” became clear to her.

Like its US counterpart “What are you,” a question with which the first author was all too familiar, the UK query “Where are you from?” is a racialised question. The workshop attendee no more wanted to know the home state of the first author's parents than people in the US wanted answers such as “a human being” when they asked “What are you?” In both cases, the question seeks a racial answer. “I'm mixed-race,” “I'm Black,” “I'm from Birmingham but my mum is from India and dad is from Scotland” are the types of responses askers are seeking.

Scientists know that races are not biologically predetermined subdivisions of humans but are instead socially constructed groupings.<sup>1</sup> Part of racialised social construction happens at the structural level in the prominence of race in laws,

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<sup>1</sup>Graves 2001; López 2006; Omi and Winant 1994.

policies, and other types of legislative and political practices and thought. In other words, it is “institutional” in quality.

Another part of racial groups’ social construction is at the micro-levels of interaction and symbolism. Regarding the latter, for example, race being socially constructed means that collective ideas have developed about what members of different races “look like.”<sup>2</sup> Ideas of race-specific physical features abound: Blacks have wide noses, Whites have light skin, Native Americans have high cheek bones, and East Asians have almond-shaped eyes. How, then, does one racially classify a PhD student who has a wide nose, light skin, and almond shaped eyes?

Even when innocently intended, questions such as “What are you?” reveal the observer’s racialised gaze,<sup>3</sup> awareness of ambiguity,<sup>4</sup> and sense of discomfort with a momentary crisis of racial meaning.<sup>5</sup> The different linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies used to ask about race within the US and UK, despite both having a dominant colourblind ideology,<sup>6</sup> underscores how race is differentially constructed in the two nations. Their different ways of defining mixed-race on their respective censuses further reveals differential zeitgeists. And yet, whilst the available tick-boxes and the phrasing of questions greatly differ, feelings towards identity, everyday experiences, and relationships with friends and family are somewhat similar. This indicates both a broader globalisation of mixedness<sup>7</sup> as well as a specific transatlanticity of mixedness.<sup>8</sup>

## **The Simultaneous Emergence of Critical Mixed Race Studies in the US and UK**

Over the past 30 years, social scientists and activists in the US and UK have sought to bring to light the uniquely racialised experiences of mixed-race people. Numerous contemporary mixed-race anthologies exploring identity and various lived experiences stemming from this racialised category were published in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>9</sup> From personal identity, to socialisation, to the processes by which “mixed-race” became self-enumerable on the censuses, this era of mixed-race scholarship in the US and UK has comprised and shaped the majority of English language work in the global canon. In contrast to earlier writings from the

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<sup>2</sup>Kaw 1993; Maclin and Malpass 2001; Sims et al. under review.

<sup>3</sup>Fanon 1967; Paragg 2017.

<sup>4</sup>Bradshaw 1992.

<sup>5</sup>Omi and Winant 1994.

<sup>6</sup>Bonilla Silva 2018[2003].

<sup>7</sup>King-O’Riain et al. 2014.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph-Salisbury 2018.

<sup>9</sup>For example, Ifekwunigwe 2004; Parker and Song 2001; Perlmann and Waters 2002; Root 1992, 1996; Williams León and Nakashima 2001; Winters and DeBose 2003; Zack 1995.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that pathologised racialised mixture,<sup>10</sup> contemporary work has frequently attempted both implicitly and explicitly to construct an alternative, “positive” discourse that celebrates and empowers this “new demographic.” At the same time – and seemingly in tension – some of this research has simultaneously highlighted areas of need and support “specific” for the population.<sup>11</sup>

Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) is a relatively recent label coined to describe the global canon of interdisciplinary research focussing on racialised mixedness.<sup>12</sup> Formerly known as Mixed Race Studies, Daniel et al. (2014) charted the “critical turn” mixed-race scholarship has taken over the past 35 years as scholars began to incorporate race-critical theories which prioritise “race” as a subject for social inquiry around racialised disparities.<sup>13</sup> Though some scholars have argued that in practice the field is not very critical in their understandings and analyses of mixedness,<sup>14</sup> CMRS is now the institutionalised name of the field in both the US and UK.<sup>15</sup>

As a critical and international field, cross-cultural research has been a mainstay within CMRS. King-O’Riain et al.’s *Global Mixed Race* (2014) and Edwards et al.’s *International Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Mixedness and Mixing* (2012), for example, both examine mixed-race populations in multiple nations.<sup>16</sup> There is also a rich scholarship specifically examining racial mixing and (mixed-) race construction, experiences, and identity in Brazil,<sup>17</sup> South Africa,<sup>18</sup> Canada,<sup>19</sup> and Puerto Rico and various Latin American countries.<sup>20</sup>

This book joins a nascent literature focussing on mixed-race experiences in the US and UK.<sup>21</sup> These two nations are often said to have a “special relationship”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Dover 1937; Gobineau 2004; Knox 1850; Stonequist 1937.

<sup>11</sup>Elam 2011; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Olumide 2002; Root 1992, 1996; Spencer 2010.

<sup>12</sup>Daniel et al. 2014.

<sup>13</sup>Daniel et al. 2014; Essed and Goldberg 2002.

<sup>14</sup>Daniel et al. 2014; Gordon 1995; Spencer 2004.

<sup>15</sup>For example, CMRS has been the name of academic conferences in both nations, a CMRS journal has been founded, and CMRS is the name of a new academic minor at San Francisco State University.

<sup>16</sup>For example, Zambia, Trinidad and Tobago, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Japan, Germany, Canada, etc.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel 2006; Hordge-Freeman 2015; Marx 1998; Nobles 2000; Osuji 2019; Telles 2006.

<sup>18</sup>Goldberg 1995; Laster Pirtle 2014; Marx 1998.

<sup>19</sup>La Flamme 2019; Mahtani 2014.

<sup>20</sup>Anzaldúa 1987; Loveman and Muniz 2007; Martinez-Echazabal 1998; Rodríguez 2000.

<sup>21</sup>Caballero 2004; Joseph-Salisbury 2018.

<sup>22</sup>Dumbrell (2009) observes that the idea of a US/UK “special relationship” is primarily an expectation of military, intelligence, and financial cooperation, despite politicians’ proclivity for characterising it as a “partnership not just of governments but of peoples” (71). Regarding partnering governments, however, he contends that the US/UK relationship may actually be as much a result of individual politicians’ (he discusses Tony Blair and George W. Bush) “personal convictions” as it is “of any

#### 4 *Mixed-Race in the US and UK*

due to (common perceptions of) their shared history, language, and values; and thus they are beneficial for a study of mixedness for several reasons. Firstly, from historic mixed-race figures such as Dido Elizabeth Belle and Sally Hemmings to contemporaries such as Barack Obama, Naomi Osaka, Meghan Markle, Lewis Hamilton, Keanu Reeves, Naomi Scott, Jason Momoa, and Daniel Holtzclaw, mixed-race people have existed, prominently, in both the US and UK for centuries. Relatedly, at 2.9 per cent and 2.2 per cent of the nations' populations,<sup>23</sup> respectively, the percentage of mixed-race people in the US and UK is comparable.

Secondly, the nations' related but different histories offer a unique perspective on the historical rootedness of contemporary racial understandings. For instance, the importance of African enslavement in the early modern period for the development of ideas about race is shared across the Atlantic. However, the classification of people with any discernible African ancestry as Black, that is, the "one-drop" rule of hypodescent, was institutionalised in the US but not the UK, leading to differential perceptions of Black mixed-race people in the two nations. On the other hand, the two nations had different relationships with the same Asian countries. Early immigration of Indians like Bhagat Singh Thind to the mainland US versus UK overseas colonisation of the subcontinent followed by only recent immigration of Indians to the British Isles contributes to observed differences regarding contemporary racialisation of (mixed-race) Asians. In short, the outgrowth of historic similarities and differences can be seen in the current constructions of mixedness in the nations. General knowledge of these events and on-going cultural exchange also underscore how ideas about race in one nation have and continue to influence ideas about race in the other.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

This book uses both macro- and micro-level theoretical frameworks as well as both comparative and relational analytical frameworks. According to Omi and Winant's (1994, 2002) racial formation theory, "racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" over time and space by a combination of social, historical, and political processes.<sup>24</sup> Racial formation theory provides a useful framework through which to investigate the particulars of racialisation processes that "locate the role of race in structuring broader social formations."<sup>25</sup> Omi and Winant view race as a social construct, though not one that is merely

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structural inclination of London to follow Washington" (65). Despite acknowledging that the US and UK do share some "real world" mutual "material interests," Dumbrell argues that common beliefs about the nations' shared history, language, and values also "reflect sentiment and wishful thinking" (65). Nevertheless, in very sociological fashion, he stresses that sentiments about the special relationship "do count for something" (71).

<sup>23</sup>Jones and Bullock 2012; Office for National Statistics 2012a, 2012b.

<sup>24</sup>Omi and Winant 1994: 55, 2002: 124.

<sup>25</sup>HoSang and LaBennett 2012: 5.



an “ideological illusion” that influences other forms of social stratification. Race has a long, salient, and pervasive history that is significant to all social relations.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, race is viewed as socially and politically transient; the meanings and logistics of it are never fully fixed. It is an “unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.”<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, racial formation theory views race as a key category of social differentiation and stratification and as a shifting concept that warrants investigation and understanding.<sup>28</sup>

In racial formation theory, the concept of race in a given socio-historical context is understood to be constructed through both structural and cultural elements within societies. By acknowledging both of these elements in racial formation, there is room for smaller-scale – and even personal – experiences to be taken into account when examining how race functions, affects, and shapes societies alongside the larger and perhaps more widely acknowledgeable structural elements that shape racial perceptions. At this micro-level, categories like race can be understood as emerging from social interaction.<sup>29</sup> In other words, categories like race are “not something that people or groups *have* or are, but rather a set of actions that people *do*.”<sup>30</sup> “Doing” race means members of society are “always involve[d in] creating groups based on perceived physical and behavioural characteristics, associating differential power and privilege with these characteristics, and then justifying the resulting inequalities.”<sup>31</sup>

Both macro- and micro-level notions of race and racism are commonplace throughout the globe. This is due, in part, to historical meeting and clashing among people groups such as in wars, colonisation, and slave trades, as well as continuing contemporary globalisation in areas such as capitalism and media. The increasing universality of race (as a term) makes it an important and relevant focus for global and comparative sociological inquiry; however, the framing must be considered carefully. Though “race” is a common term, the specific conceptions and constructions vary across time and space. In his work on global racialisation, Dikötter (2008) notes that global racism shares “a language grounded in science ... [and] like all idioms it is rich, flexible, complex and ever evolving.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, he argues for an interactive approach to comparisons that acknowledges the common racist beliefs that are at the root of each society’s particular version of racialised meaning.

Goldberg (2009) appreciates this analytical focus on common roots but critiques Dikötter and other social scientific work on race and racism for

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<sup>26</sup>HoSang and LaBennett 2012.

<sup>27</sup>Omi and Winant 1994: 55.

<sup>28</sup>Omi and Winant 2015.

<sup>29</sup>West and Fensermaker 1995.

<sup>30</sup>Markus and Moya 2010: x emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup>Markus and Moya 2010: 4.

<sup>32</sup>Dikötter 2008: 1490.

overemphasis on “discretely conceived” sociopolitical nation states.<sup>33</sup> Comparisons of the US, South Africa, and Brazil, he explains, rarely focus on the shared “colonial outlooks, interests, dispositions, and arrangements [that] set the tone and terms” for race and racism in all of those nations.<sup>34</sup> Comparisons analogising the current situation of Palestinians in Israel to Black South Africans under apartheid, likewise in his view, too often underappreciate the role of shared history such as “apartheid South Africa’s support for Israel, militarily and economically, in reciprocating Israel’s willingness to consort with the apartheid state.”<sup>35</sup>

Going beyond Dikötter’s recognition of shared history, Goldberg draws on the critical work on race of “W.E.B. Du Bois, Ruth Benedict, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hanna Arendt, Edward Said, Stuart Hall” and others to observe that contemporary constructions of race and racism in any given location are “influenced, shaped by and fuel those elsewhere.”<sup>36</sup> This means that “racist arrangements anywhere – in any place – depend to a smaller or larger degree on racist practice almost everywhere else.”<sup>37</sup> Goldberg refers to race scholarship that focusses on these reciprocal interrelationships as taking a relational approach.

Though this book is subtitled “comparing” the past, present, and future, we agree with Goldberg that comparison without an analytical focus on relationality is insufficient. The analysis herein, therefore, follows in the footsteps of other CMRS work on multiple nations in that it offers both a traditional comparativist account that contrasts and compares as well as a relational account that connects. We accomplish this by identifying the similarities and differences between mixed-race in the US and UK and then discussing and explaining them in terms of both historical roots and ongoing contemporary interrelationships.

## Methods and Methodology

*Mixed-Race in the US and UK* draws on original research projects conducted by the authors. Since some projects focussed on macro-level social phenomena and others focussed on micro-level interactions, one strength of this book is the ability to present a view of mixedness at multiple levels of society. In addition, by drawing on both sociopolitical institutions and mixed-race civil society and “regular” mixed-race people, instead of one or the other like extant literature,<sup>38</sup> we are able to include the perspectives of both those who have the social power to influence

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<sup>33</sup>Goldberg 2009: 1272.

<sup>34</sup>Goldberg 2009: 1273.

<sup>35</sup>Goldberg 2009: 1277.

<sup>36</sup>Goldberg 2009: 1273–1274.

<sup>37</sup>Goldberg 2009: 1275.

<sup>38</sup>Davenport 2018: 18; see Joseph-Salisbury 2018 and Newman 2019 for recent work on mixed-race men; see Mills 2017 and Buggs 2019 for recent work on mixed-race women; see Masuoka 2017 and Hernández 2018 for recent work on political elites/socio-political institutions.

the construction of mixed-race at the structural level as well as investigate the experiences of those without institutional power who live with and/or challenge those constructions in their daily lives. In accordance with standard ethical considerations and/or at the request of some of the participants, we have anonymised the identities of all research organisations and individual participants.

Using facet methodology,<sup>39</sup> data for Chapters 2 and 4 were gathered by Dr Njaka through two approaches in order to examine different, complementary aspects of mixed-race construction. In the first instance, a critical discourse analysis of census reports explored the manner in which mixed-race is described and constructed in US and UK state institutions. For mixed-race civil society (comprised of groups organising around mixed-race identity and experience), in order to address both how it (re)produces mixed-race, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from US and UK civil society organisations (CSOs) between 2008 and 2011. Using framework analysis,<sup>40</sup> Dr Njaka uncovered themes that influence the descriptions and conceptions of mixed-race at each CSO.

Dr Sims' 2011–2012 interviews with 30 phenotypically racially ambiguous mixed-race adults in the US and UK are the data source for Chapters 3, 5, and 6. Admittedly, not all mixed-race individuals appear racially ambiguous, or “clearly mixed” to quote Mills<sup>41</sup>; and there are certainly some “mono-racial” individuals who do look racially ambiguous. Nevertheless, phenotypically racially ambiguous mixed-race adults were chosen as the study population because their racial identity is often very much an accomplished (verses rigidly ascribed) identity, meaning their experiences provide insight into the micro-performative aspects of race (i.e. “doing” race).<sup>42</sup> In this study, Dr Sims explored how mixed-race adults navigate ambiguity and create racial meaning in their everyday lives. Twenty-eight of the 30 interviewees identified as heterosexual, therefore the first interviews from her current project (begun in 2018) with queer mixed-race people are the data source for Chapter 7.

## Outline of Chapters

Situated within a racial formation theoretical framework, Chapter 2 explores racialisation at the structural level through examining the ways that the US and UK national censuses create, shape, and maintain racialised notions within each national context. Focussing on the reporting of mixed-race, census reports are analysed qualitatively for content as well as assumptive positions in order to highlight the overall distinct ways that the US and UK use discursive practices to conceptualise mixed-race. These constructions of mixed-race then shape the ways that the rest of each nation's institutions and population understand, accept,

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<sup>39</sup>Mason 2011.

<sup>40</sup>Ritchie and Lewis 2003.

<sup>41</sup>Mills 2017.

<sup>42</sup>Khanna and Johnson 2010; Song 2003.

and/or contest mixed-race. As becomes apparent in the analyses, the racialised categorisations at the state level are not mere descriptions of data. The aims of the census include providing a racialised narrative of the population – imbued with meanings and social consequences – and providing a framework within which individuals are allowed to categorise themselves and be recognised.

Chapter 3 on mixed-race identity examines the thought processes behind what racial category/ies mixed-race people tick on their census and other forms. Focussing on the similarities and differences in how mixed-race people in the two nations assert their identities (or not) on these forms, it reveals that though the format change to allow mixed-race race identification was welcomed by most it was not seen as a cure all to the mishaps of racial data collection or identity recording. The similar influence of the “one-drop” rule for people of African descent and the different ways nationality is combined (or not) with racial identity are also discussed.

Chapter 4 critically analyses the specific discourses generated within US and UK mixed-race CSOs. The chapter examines the ways in which CSO representatives describe and construct notions of mixed-race. The analyses highlight the variety of racialised paradigms employed by civil society that lead to a relative fluidity in racialised constructions, in contrast to their respective state entities. At times, these paradigms also include some tendencies to fall back on discourses that are reminiscent of the pathological constructions from previous centuries. The data are explored both comparatively and relationally, identifying similarities, differences, and how the states have influenced the CSOs in constructions of mixedness.

Everyday experiences within societies that hold these paradigmatic views are the topic of Chapter 5. Focussing on the different ways that mixed-race people respond to others when asked “What are you?”/“Where are you from?” the chapter explains how, to many mixed-race adults, this questioning is felt as “annoying” when posed from mono-racial people but is welcomed as an opportunity for bonding and “mixed-race solidarity” when posed from other mixed-race people. The language that mixed-race people use in response to others’ “racial gaze”<sup>43</sup> is revealed sometimes to accommodate and sometimes to confront the expected linguistic racial norms<sup>44</sup> of both nations.

In addition to speaking of their own experiences and identity, Black mixed-race interviewees also discussed how racial considerations influenced their dating and plans for having children; and those who were already partnered with children discussed how race intersected with parenting. Chapter 6 thus focusses on the family planning and parenting experiences of mixed-race adults. Juxtaposing Sims’ US interviewees with the accounts of the UK parents in Song’s (2017) *Multiracial Parents: Mixed Families, Generational Change, and the Future of Race*, the chapter reveals the similarities and differences in mixed-race adults’ families “a generation down” in the two nations.

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<sup>43</sup>Fanon 1967; Paragg 2017.

<sup>44</sup>Cazenave 2015.