I hate it. I hate the feeling I get when I am forced in online surveys, job applications, or school admissions to check a box to identify my racial background. A feeling of confusion and uncertainty overwhelms me in an internal battle to check just one box.

I am not one box.
I am two. Maybe three or four if I want to be completely accurate. But I wonder: what is the purpose of “the box”?

When we check a box, we are claiming a race, an ancestry, and even a status. Race as an organizing principle in society has been a source of hegemony and hierarchy for centuries. Its origins are unknown and unreliable. Historically dominant groups have used race as a basis to divide and distinguish themselves from “the other.” In the United States, the legal and scientific definition of race has continued to alter according to societal standards. In some ways we have moved forward from the “check one box only” of the 1850 census, which included three categories: white, black, and mulatto. However, we still attempt to check one box when many of us are biracial or multiracial. The reality in America is hybridity. In the definition that I use, hybridity means the blending of two or more cultures into a unified whole. Hybrids are chameleons adjusting to the shifting landscapes and isms that may reject nonconformity. Moreover, evidenced by the increasing amount of interracial marriages and ethnically ambiguous subjects is the realization that racial purity is a myth.

In order to preserve the ideal of white purity, a “one-drop rule” of black ancestry was used to separate and protect the white race from any contamination. The term *hypodescent* referred to the practice of “categorizing children with mixed racial parentage by assigning them to the parental racial category with the lowest social status.” Terms such as *mulatto* and *métis* have historically carried the negative meaning of “half-breed” or “mixed blood.” Careful attention
to the link between race and status became salient to protect the dominant white interests. Cultural studies theorist Henry A. Giroux examines “whiteness” as a concept grounded by social and political constructs. He articulates the assumptions of whiteness as a “cultural practice of promoting race-based hierarchies.”

Giroux’s work therefore promotes an understanding of race as a product of social construction, inevitably and utterly removed from biology and essentialism. The fiat of racial classification encounters problems with the mixing of races since this phenomenon challenges concocted divisions and hierarchies.

Authenticity is constructed within the racial paradigm as both a marker and tool for inclusion and exclusion. We hear statements like “He isn’t really black” as assumptions based on essentialist ideas of race—usually and unfortunately reinforcing biases, stereotypes, and prejudices. Multiracial subjects are the “antithesis of authenticity” inasmuch as they do not fit into one group or culture. This begs the question, are multiracial subjects changing the landscape of racial classification?

The future—and, I would argue, the present—is headed toward a migratory culture where different ethnicities share traditions and give rise to a new hybrid identity. The products of these coalitions—multiracial subjects—are heterogeneous symbols of empowerment. The blurring of races is emphatically evident with the boom in interracial coupling since the 1960s Civil Rights movement and the influx of diverse groups of immigrants over the last century. It really just takes a closer look around: step outside and see the Black/White, Asian/Latino faces that are forming the new image of our global society.

The identity politics linked to checking “the box” implicate a dominant or minority status. However, multiracial individuals complicate the “black and white” paradigm. Race-based classification is used to erect dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, yet the hybrid individual muddies the false boundaries of race. Multiracial subjects are an anomaly, transcending fixed categories and symbolizing the limited nature of race as a category and organizing principle. For anthropologists and sociologists today, the only important use of race is as a subset of ethnicity. This means recognizing the ancestral origins of a racial group by ways of individual ethnic groups, while also accounting for the range of variations between and among groups based on ethnicity, not skin color. Such a perspective allows for a deeper investigation of race within the context of national origin, geographic location, and history.

These fundamental aspects of any group identity call into question the meaning of being “black” or “white.” It is helpful to consider how meanings of race shift according to time and space. As transnational feminist Chandra Mohanty suggests, “the color line differs depending on one’s geographical location.” Therefore, any meanings attributed to race are also relative to one’s socio-political location. Thus, race-based classification may create a monolithic construction of individuals absent of temporal and spatial considerations.
Breaking out of “the box” is a type of catharsis for multiracial individuals. The collision of my biracial Haitian/Indian background, American citizenship, and gendered self have led to violent encounters that have destroyed my humanity, questioning my hybridity as a mistaken mutation and political aberration. My close friends of similar genetic/cultural makeup express these same accounts of fitting in neither here nor there. In contrast to being marked as black or white, multiracial subjects lie in the margins, confronting the mythic power of race. Though it may seem unlikely or unrealistic to eradicate the category of race from the public consciousness, I argue that it is already occurring through the increasing visibility and acceptance of multiracial subjects. One current example is presidential hopeful Barack Obama who is biracial yet is transcending racial division by bringing together white and black voters under one banner. Such greater cultural visibility and acceptance of multiracial subject points to a shift in our society. In addition, the 2000 census included, for the first time, a box for “multiracial.” Though only 4 percent checked this box, it does address the new awareness and reality of multiracial identities. The low percentage of people who checked this box does inform us of the impact of the racial binary system in America. Race is an ingrained sociopolitical system, highlighting the hierarchy of skin color. The shift from racial binaries of white and black to a future of hybridity is no easy transition; nonetheless, it is occurring. America is an immigrant country and, more than ever, a hybrid culture. Therefore, multiracial individuals will continue to transcend “the box,” and ultimately, we might find ourselves checking no box at all.

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