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Multiracial Exhaustion and Racial Agency Under the Monoracial Imperative: Fighting, Flipping and Capitulation

Ian Anthony[1]
University of California, Santa Barbara, CA

Zirui Zhou[2]
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Braden Artzer[3]
University of California, Santa Barbara, CA

Allyson Zuleta-Alonzo[4]
University of California, Santa Barbara, CA

Karissa Low[5]
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

Abstract: This article explores how multiracial individuals navigate the "monoracial imperative," a societal pressure to adopt a singular racial identity, and the emotional trauma it creates. Drawing on 43 semi-structured interviews, the study introduces the concept of "multiracial exhaustion," a form of psychosocial distress that arises from recurrent questioning encapsulated by the persistent "What are you?" question. Contrary to stereotypes of confusion, participants demonstrate strategic racial agency through three distinct coping mechanisms: "fighting" (resisting monoracial demands), "flipping" (redirecting the question to inquirers), and "monoracial capitulation**"** (adopting singular racial categorization for social convenience due to the monoracial imperative). These strategies reveal how multiracial individuals are neither naïve nor complicit actors within systems of white supremacy. Instead, they actively confront complex racial dynamics shaped by both hierarchical pressures from whites and protective gatekeeping by communities of color. The findings challenge dominant racial frameworks that marginalize multiracial realities and call for more nuanced scholarly attention to multiracial mental health, agency, and racialized identity management in the context of racial rules in the United States. This study ultimately advocates for a paradigm shift that

[1] Corresponding Author: PhD Candidate, Department of Sociology, Social Studies and Media Science Building, Santa Barbara, CA. ianwaller@ucsb.edu
[2] Master's degree student, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, IL, zhouzr@uchicago.edu
[3] Associated Author, Department of Sociology, Social Studies and Media Science Building, Santa Barbara, CA, bartzer@asu.edu
[4] Associated Author, Department of Sociology, Social Studies and Media Science Building, Santa Barbara, CA, allysonzuleta26@gmail.com
[5] Clinical master's degree student, Department of Social Work, University of Chicago, IL, karissallow@uchicago.edu

recognizes multiracial identity as a legitimate and complex site of racial agency, advocating for the acknowledgment of *multi*-racial literacy beyond the constraints of monoracial paradigms.
Keywords: monoracial imperative, multiracial identity, racial agency, multiracial exhaustion, race, mental health

There has been an alarming emergence of data related to mental health and multiracial people (Franco et al., 2021; Lam-Hine et al., 2023). Although multiracial studies have sought to illuminate this previously (Daniel, 2021; Remedios & Chasteen, 2013), the wider sociological canon has marginalized these concerns as an individual issue of psychological development (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Desmond & Emirbayer, 2020). However, studies on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) metric—which predicts risks related to household mental illness, substance use, domestic violence, incarceration of a household member, parental separation or divorce, as well as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse—reveal that multiracial people are more adversely affected than monoracially Black, white, and Hispanic groups (Giano et al., 2020). Thus, dismissing this as mere psychological assessments is insufficient and raises the question: What structural factors are contributing to the higher ACEs scores for multiracial people?

In this paper, we argue it is related to the monoracial imperative and hypodescent—the societal pressures to identify with a single racial category and address racial issues only within monoracial contexts (Daniel, 2021). The sociology of race critiques multiraciality for issues of equity, specifically out of concern regarding historical complicity with white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) and fear of the Latin-American model of race, which prioritizes colorblindness, thereby obscuring anti-Black racism (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2016). The theory of the monoracial imperative understands such concerns but argues that they overlook the realities of a changing racial landscape and need not give in to fatalistic impulses (Daniel, 2006). The theory fundamentally counters the notion that multiracial identity is inherently invested in colorblindness and implicit white supremacy. Indeed, it subtly argues—and we elaborate—that such analyses are moral assertions, rooted in fear, rather than a serious assessment of multiracial lives within the larger fabric of racial life in the United States. Yet, as a recent theoretical development, the monoracial imperative lacks empirical support.

Therefore, through 43 semi-structured interviews, we asked: How does the monoracial imperative manifest in everyday interactions for self-identifying mixed and multiracial people? Through an illumination of the pervasive experience with the "What are you?" question, our findings reveal that mixed and multiracial individuals (terms used interchangeably) cope with what we refer to as "multiracial exhaustion"—the psychosocial distress caused by the monoracial imperative—through three discursive strategies: fighting, flipping, and monoracial capitulation.

There is a widespread feeling among multiracial individuals that they cannot openly express their multiracial identity, despite being asked, "What are you?" (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). At the heart of this issue is racial agency—"a desire to tackle racial issues in both public and private discourse" (Dortch et al., 2023, p. 2). While this seems straightforward, it becomes contentious when multiracial people advocate for multi-racial agency. This is the case because the "rules of race" are perceived as essentially fixed (Ocampo, 2016) and moral (Al-Gharbi, 2024). In other words, multiracial identification is seen as an investment in white supremacy based on the Latin-American racial model (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2016), which uses terms such as "mixed" to obscure anti-Black racism (Twine, 1998). Such arguments lead the normative sociological canon to marginalize multiracial studies which is reflected in the public sphere through media portrayals

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as well as edge cases (Carter, 2013; Brubaker, 2016). Together, this effectively creates a moratorium around multiracial identity as part of the wider conversation of race in America, restricting racial agency to instances that do not challenge the monoracial imperative or hypodescent (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Dortch et al., 2023; Gatwiri & Moran, 2022; Lee-won et al., 2017).

The consequence is the silencing of multiracial experiences—including enduring microaggressions (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Rolón-Dow & Bailey, 2022), racial invalidation (Nadal et al., 2011), and racism (Franco, 2019)—as well as objectification (Tran et al., 2016), sexualization (Joseph-Salisbury, 2018), and social sanctions like isolation when one expresses their multiracial identity (Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Moreover, it is often labeled as individual "confusion." And while confusion is certainly part of the equation, such an analysis is overly simplistic, reducing a broader structural issue to an individual problem. Such a move is dismissive of more complex emotional displays like anger, frustration, sadness, and resignation, which we suggest are symptoms of multiracial exhaustion. Moreover, if so many multiracial people are "confused," we must begin to ask if confusion is in fact not reflective of an individual problem but of a structural one. In other words, are multiracial people confused, or is race itself more complex than we are willing to admit, with multiracial identity exposing this complexity?

Ultimately, we show mixed-race individuals navigate the monoracial imperative using three strategies of racial agency: (1) fighting—direct resistance to the monoracial imperative, (2) flipping—playing with or reversing the monoracial imperative, and (3) monoracial capitulation—deferring to the monoracial premise and wider monoracial paradigm. In the following sections, we elaborate on the literature, review methods, and discuss the findings before concluding.

Illuminating The Monoracial Imperative

Daniel (2021) describes the monoracial imperative as the pervasive pressure to racially identify with a singular category, central to which is hypodescent, a racial rule demanding that multiracial individuals identify with the most "subaltern" identity. Daniel argues that this concretized in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the creation of a unified "multiracial" coalition that was more aware of the covert nature of white supremacy (Omi & Winant, 2014), its capacity for co-optation (Painter, 2010), and its transformations (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). However, due to hypodescent, this "multiracial coalition" was functionally a multi-*mono*racial coalition that effectively excluded self-identifying multiracials and fostered a culture of silence around multiraciality to maintain a unified stance against white supremacy.

Of course, it was not obvious this was occurring, and the fear of white supremacy justified such an oversight. One such justification for excluding multiracial research from contemporary sociology is that the categories are too broad to study effectively. As a result, "mixed" and "multiracial" identities are ignored until specific "coethnic" or "panethnic" identities emerge (Ocampo 2016), such as "Mexipinos" (Guevarra Jr., 2012), "Blasians" (Washington, 2015), "Blaxicans" (Romo 2012) and "MENA" (Maghbouleh, 2017). The underlying argument is that terms like "mixed" and "multiracial" lack permanence and, therefore, are considered unhelpful. This remains the argument even though social processes and categorizations are fundamental to sociology, creating a paradox within the sociology of race that some scholars find perplexing (Brubaker, 2006).

An additional argument is implicitly moral. Daniel (2021) suggests there has been a long-standing silent prohibition, or "politics of citation" (Delgado, 1984), if not against studying, then

at least against simply including multiracial lives in normative sociology. On the micro-level, some describe widespread exclusion in concert with various microaggressions as "monoracism" (Harris et al., 2015; Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020). We find that term problematic as it is defined but useful for highlighting the monoracial imperative. As Daniel (2021) notes, these microaggressions differ by monoracial position: monoracial whites often seek to maintain racial hierarchies (white supremacy), while monoracial people of color—especially Black communities—engage in protective gatekeeping for solidarity and safety (protection against white supremacy). He calls this distinction "critical," and we agree (more on this in the discussion), but what this importantly reflects is a vital oversight based upon a morally based assumption.

Indeed, recent research has revealed how the social sciences may often prioritize their moral stance over assessing social reality, including race (Al-Gharbi, 2024). In short, the moratorium and so-called "monoracism" which are better understood as the deployment of various microaggressions, appear to occur out of concern about supporting a potential future "multiracial white supremacy" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014), rooted in historical examples where "mixed" and "multiracial" terms were used to obscure anti-Black racism in countries like South Africa (Spencer, 1997), Brazil (Twine, 1998), and Mexico (Sue, 2013). Known as the "Latin American model," this is a kind of stratified "triracial" system in which Blacks are still at the bottom but multiracials are more closely linked to Whiteness (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2016). In short, their assessment of the marginalization of multiraciality is essentially an assertion of a virtuous approach, not a denial that multiracial lives are part of our racial reality. The concern is that a "Latin-Americanization" could emerge in the United States despite arguments that the U.S. context may differ (Saperstein & Gullickson, 2013) and need not take the same path (Daniel, 2006).

Certainly, the emergence of a triracial, Latin American model in the United States is a valid concern. The historical record shows that such racial classification systems, which present complexity as progress, often end up complicit in maintaining existing hierarchies. Yet, this does not change the fact that America's racial landscape is shifting, and the number of Americans identifying as mixed or multiracial continues to grow (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2020; Parker et al., 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), which demands sociological attention. Furthermore, even the proponents of the hypothesis are unsure it will occur (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2016); they create categories where "some multiracials" are categorized as white, and "most multiracials" are "honorary white" which seems more like an argument against recognizing multiracial identity as legitimate than a useful sociological theory for the future. The implication is clear: multiracial individuals should fall in line with the monoracial order.

Racial Agency and Monoracial Enforcement in the Public Sphere

The enforcement of the monoracial imperative in sociology is mirrored in public discourse, further highlighting how multi-racial agency is discouraged. Here, a definition is helpful. Dortch et al. (2023) define "racial agency" as "a desire to tackle racial issues in both public and private discourse, stemming from racial identity, separation from community, respectability politics, and violence" (p. 1). This includes resisting stereotypes and engaging in active self-definition based on personal experiences. Initially conceptualized among Black American women (Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015), racial agency has since been extended to Black African youth in Australia (Gatwiri & Moran, 2022). While the emphasis remains on all types of Blackness, it has been extended to a wider array of racial minorities. Lee-Won et al. (2017) emphasize the "desire to make positive changes in their racial/ethnic community by engaging in behaviors that

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promote and uplift" (p. 1101). For multiracial people, and studies, the emphasis has generally been on self-definition, but that may only be because group formation is met with similar kinds of backlash found on the individual level (DaCosta, 2007). Jones (2011) specifically shows that challenges to multiracial community formation occur at the meso level, similar to how microaggressions function at the micro level. In short, multi-racial agency includes the ability to self-identify as mixed as well as advocate for multiracial people as a group. However, group formation remains stifled due to suppression at the macro level, which can be observed in the public sphere through the way popular culture uses "jokes," "caricatures," and "edge cases" to minimize multiraciality.

Tiger Woods's self-identification as "Cablanasian" is widely ridiculed as symbolic of multiracial "confusion" (Carter, 2013) which is a kind of monoracial pressure. However, other media depictions exemplify the same constraints. For instance, The Chappelle Show's "racial draft," and ATLANTA's fictional "transracial" Black man mock the idea of racial self-determination and equate multiracial identity with absurdity. These narratives often shift to discussions of "white-passing" privilege and the "mulatto escape hatch" (Daniel, 2006), emphasizing multiracial proximity to whiteness while oversimplifying the complex lived experiences of multiracial individuals. Moreover, these representations neglect non-white multiracial individuals, effectively rendering them invisible (Rondilla et al., 2017). This narrow focus on passing obscures the broader racial work multiracial individuals undertake in resisting white supremacy and addressing the complexities of identity (M. Mills, 2017).

Beyond caricature, the dismissal of racial agency is reinforced through edge cases such as Rachel Dolezal and Elizabeth Warren. Dolezal is a white woman who falsely claimed Black identity but was ultimately exposed by her white parents. Although it appears salient based on widespread public attention (Brownson, 2018), it is not reflective of any serious pattern in society. In fact, Dolezal may perfectly embody the monoracial imperative because rather than embracing any kind of multiracial identity or consciousness, she attempted to transform herself from monoracial white to monoracial Black. On the other hand, Warren is a United States senator who attempted to claim American Indigenous heritage based on a distant ancestor. Warren's case is more concerning as a potential pattern of whites claiming mixed heritages as a sign of cultural understanding and allyship (Palmer, 2023). Yet, such claims are also hardly common and Brubaker (2016) notes the discrepancy here, raising questions about why identity rules are applied unequally across different demographic groups in sociology, particularly as it pertains to race; he argues the failure to understand these processes is shortsighted, especially in an age where identities are becoming unsettled with more frequency.

Street Race and the "What are you?" Experience

Perhaps the most common argument used to discourage multiracial identification is "street race" (Lopez, 2024), or the claim that, based on "the ocular dimension" (Omi & Winant, 2014), everyone easily falls into one of the five broad-based racial categories. However, it is specifically two—Black and white—that are implied as primarily important because of social consensus about the permanence of prejudice in law enforcement and legislation for Black Americans (Bell, 1992). While the Black-white binary and its relationship to racism, law enforcement, and legislation is certainly important, and perhaps paramount, multiracial identification does not preclude dark skin or the risk of such consequences (Rondilla et al., 2017). Furthermore, these assumptions presume street race is a consistent phenomenon when research in multiracial studies show otherwise.

Inaccurate assessment and persistent racial guessing—what Sims (2016) calls "consistent inconsistency"—are part of a long line of multiracial studies examining the identity challenges posed by racial assessment. This comes into much clearer view regarding the "What are you?" question – an inquiry intended to supposedly aid in racial categorization but which is shown to rarely simplify or clarify racial assessment. Research on the "what are you?" question calls into question the reality of "street race." For multiracial individuals, the phenomenon is so pervasive that it is often referred to simply as "the question" (Shumaker, 2010). Importantly, it is mostly felt as a microaggression—a form of racial invalidation (Johnston & Nadal, 2010), fetishization (Harris, 2016), racism (Franco, 2019), and stigmatization (Grier et al., 2014). This means it is often perceived as mostly, and especially, offensive.

Notably, "the question" rarely ends with a simple response and is often followed by "What are you, really?" (CW. Mills, 1998) or some other form of racial invalidation. Moreover, the question is asked in a variety of ways. For instance, it can be initiated through explicit inquiries such as guessing race or asking about family background (M. Mills, 2017; Sims, 2016). Furthermore, it is rarely limited to a single question, making it what Rockquemore (1998) calls the "What are you? experience." This is similar to "racial interaction orders," or the "white interaction order," a set of implicit rules that seek to maintain racial hierarchies by relying on stereotypical associations to enforce a racial hierarchy with whiteness as dominant, thereby implying white supremacy (Rawls & Duck, 2020). However, while some perceive it as racist, especially when coming from whites (Franco, 2019; Grier et al., 2014), multiracial people report receiving racial inquiries from anyone, and these questions often feel overly intrusive regardless of who is asking (Ho & Kteily, 2022).

The monoracial imperative is the most comprehensive theory as it accounts for these nuances, suggesting that racial inquiry amongst whites is likely related to hierarchy (perpetuation of white supremacy), and racial inquiry from people of color and "especially for Blacks" is likely related community support and safety (protection from white supremacy) (Daniel, 2021, p. 110). However, to multiracial people, the consequence often feels the same, especially because such nuance is likely missing from these interactions. Thus, mixed-race people feel it as suspicion, minimization, potential racism, and a lack of empathy regarding the multiracial experience, no matter who is asking or guessing.

"Confusion" or Multiracial Exhaustion?

The net effect of the social marginalization, public discourse mockery and minimization, interpersonal "consistent inconsistency," microaggressions, fetishization, stigmatization, racial invalidation, and racism, ultimately leads to what we identify as multiracial exhaustion**:** a form of racial fatigue unique to multiracial people, leading those who identify as mixed to experience psychological distress aligned with Adverse Childhood Experiences research (Giano et al., 2020; Lam-Hine et al., 2023). We argue these symptoms are being conflated and thus are perpetuating the stereotype of multiracials as "confused" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Desmond & Emirbayer, 2020; Remedios & Chasteen, 2013). Indeed, in the seminal text on racial formations — the processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, and transformed, and which the Black/white binary is primary — in the United States, Omi and Winant (2014) state that "confusion reigns" (p. 4). Yet, multiracial individuals appear to be the only ones who face accusations of "confusion."

It seems clear that this stems from "the question" in concert with hypodescent and the monoracial imperative. When asked the question, self-identifying multiracial people are tasked

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with either disclosing their racial identity in alignment with their entire racial heritage, which puts them in violation of the rule of hypodescent, or engaging in deceit by deferring to the monoracial standard, which causes distress due to racial secrecy and familial erasure (Kennedy, 2003). Recent research shows that some mixed-race people seek to end the "experience" without further interrogation through "racial elevator speeches" (Heilman, 2022). This provides nuance regarding a form of self-definition, but a deeper conversation about multiracial agency, multiracial exhaustion, and discursive strategies in the context of mental health is still missing. Thus, we explore how multiracial people cope with multiracial exhaustion through three strategies, emphasizing how these are coping mechanisms related to mental health: (1) fighting—directly resisting the monoracial imperative, (2) flipping—playing with or reversing the monoracial imperative, and (3) monoracial capitulation—deferring to the monoracial premise and paradigm.

These strategies clarify that multiracial individuals are not confused. Rather, their ability to detect and skillfully navigate complex, often racially charged, social situations highlights significant racial acuity, which we refer to as multiracial literacy**.** While mixed-race individuals may experience confusion due to unequal interest in identity processes, they also exhibit a broad range of emotions—anger, frustration, sadness, and despondency—stemming from restrictions on their racial agency and a perceived lack of empathy for their experiences. Thus, we argue that fighting, flipping, and monoracial capitulation function as both micro- and meso-level strategies for navigating racial rules and as coping mechanisms for multiracial exhaustion. Lastly, the monoracial imperative highlights potential differences in intention between monoracial whites and monoracial people of color regarding multiracial interrogation of racial agency, particularly in comparison to so-called "monoracism." We seek to meaningfully contribute to the discussion of a possible simmering tension between these communities that has yet to be addressed.

Methods

Data Collection

This study interviewed 43 self-identified multiracial individuals from a diverse range of multiracial backgrounds across the United States. The only constraining qualification to be included in the study, other than identifying as multiracial, was significant time spent in the United States. "Significant" being *years* as participants needed to display familiarity with the unique racial rules in the United States and have lived experiences there from which to draw.

Data collection occurred between mid-2022 and early 2024, with participants recruited through social media platforms, including Reddit, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok. Snowball sampling was also employed when participants offered to reach out to other multiracial people on our behalf. Prior to the interviews, a pre-interview survey was used to gather social demographic information beyond race, such as gender, age, education, occupation, and geographic location, which helped contextualize the participants' experiences.

A list of questions was prepared for the interview. However, if participants seemed invested in discussing a particular part of their life outside of the script, we pulled those threads to see what emerged (Small & Calarco, 2022). Of the 43 interviews, 36 were conducted by the first author, 3 by the second author, 2 by the third author and 2 by the fourth author. Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours, though one lasted 3.5. Grounded theory was the methodological approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the software programs Otter.ai and Dedoose were used for transcription and coding, respectively. Each author engaged in individual coding of the data. After,

three rounds of group coding were conducted: (1) preliminary theme and code generation, (2) transcription and line-by-line coding, and (3) detailed code analysis and comparison. Codes such as "mental health," "anger," "overt/covert microaggressions," and "exhaustion" were relevant codes which became findings. Any discrepencies were settled by the lead author.

Demographics

Because of the complexities of racial categorization inherent in this study and all studies on multiracial identity, particularly forced choice to mark a "box" (Herman, 2004), we used a "write in" format. This method resulted in a wide range of mixtures. Therefore, included is the *number of* multiracial mixtures that participants identified, rather than their specific multiracial identities: 30 participants identified as having two races, 9 identified as having three, and 4 identified as having four or more. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 66, with an average age of 28. The group consisted of 24 women, 15 men, and 4 non-binary individuals.

Because the study is situated specifically in the U.S. and region seems to be an increasingly important demographic, census data was used to categorize participants into regions: Pacific (22), Middle Atlantic (5), West South Central (3), New England (3), Mountain West (2), West North Central (2), South Atlantic (2), East North Central (2), East South Central (2). Importantly, the Pacific region includes California, Hawaii, and Alaska, the three states with the highest sample of self-identified multiracials (Desmond & Emirbayer, 2020). Although a disproportionate share of the sample comes from the Pacific region, this should not be surprising, as the study specifically sought out self-identifying mixed individuals, and the Pacific region is where such identification is most common. In fact, it is helpful to compare these findings with other important studies, such as M. Mills (2017) and Khanna (2010), which were conducted solely in the U.S. South—where hypodescent is the norm—and the Northeast where ethnic identity and race is often conflated (Waters, 1990) and multiracial identity is mostly dismissed or ignored entirely, yet share many commonalities with this study.

Findings

Fighting: Direct Resistance to the Monoracial Imperative

Lucia, a 34-year-old Afro-Latina woman living in Arizona, was the only participant who did not mention the "What are you?" question on her own accord. However, when asked if she was aware of it, she responded with an exasperated eye roll and scoffed, "Of course." Explaining how she addresses it, Lucia said bluntly, "I shut that shit down. I'm like, 'I'm not doing this, okay!' There are so many things you could ask me as a person other than just what skin tone I am." Her refusal to legitimize the question and her confrontational stance exemplify the "fighting" approach common among participants, directly challenging the expectation to reveal an essentialized racial identity to satisfy curiosity. While her response might seem defensive, Lucia shared how anticipating this question had taken an emotional toll, stemming from childhood traumas and racial rejection by family, peers, and acquaintances.

Initially identifying as Mexican-American, the identity tied to her mother, Lucia was often told she was "too Black" and "not Mexican enough" due to her lack of Spanish language fluency. Such invalidations align with research showing multiracial individuals frequently face messages that they are "not enough" of any single race (Grier et al., 2014). Feeling rejected, Lucia began

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identifying as Black, but here, too, she faced exclusion, this time for her cultural tastes. Pointing to her dyed turquoise hair, punk aesthetic, and Sex Pistols shirt, Lucia remarked: "As you may have noticed, I like rock music, punk culture… I had a big goth phase in high school, and a lot of my friends were basically just white."

In short, her interests were deemed antithetical to Blackness in her social life, leading to further rejection. Lucia's experiences underscore how multiracial individuals are not only pressured to identify monoracially but also to conform culturally, linguistically, and aesthetically to monoracial stereotypes. Failing to meet these expectations often results in rejection and invalidation.

When asked how she coped with these competing demands, Lucia threw up her hands in frustration and performed exasperation, "It's like, okay, fine motherfuckers, you tell me what I am!" This performance of exhaustion encapsulates how "fighting" emerges as a response to the confusing and restrictive racial rules of the monoracial imperative. Initiated through the ocular dimension (Omi & Winant, 2014) or "street race" (Lopez, 2024), the imperative extends far beyond physical appearance, demanding alignment with cultural and aesthetic stereotypes that are often impossible to satisfy. Lucia's testimony reveals how these shifting and unattainable expectations lead to frustration, anger, and ultimately, multiracial exhaustion.

While Lucia's approach to "fighting" reflects overt frustration and anger, Marvelle, a 45-year-old woman originally from Roma, Mexico, embodies a more measured style. Having spent most of her adult life in Southern California, Marvelle engages in "fighting" by correcting assumptions and educating others. When asked about misidentification, she shared:

> I first clarify that I'm not [the incorrect guess]. And then the question is, 'Well, what are you?' And at that moment, I'm like, this is a perfect opportunity. I am Mexican, and within my Mexican culture, [there is] Indigenous, gypsy and Black. And coming to the US, I was [raised] by Jamaicans, which were a huge part of also my culture, development and my Black side. So, that adds to the complexity.

Marvelle uses such moments to resist the monoracial imperative by asserting her complex identity and challenging the assumptions embedded in racial misidentification. For her, the "What are you?" experience, marked by consistent inconsistency, affirms her mixed-race identity while exposing others' ignorance about multiracial lives and race more broadly (Sims, 2016). Unlike Lucia's anger, Marvelle's approach relies on calm corrections and self-assertion. By refusing to reduce herself to a singular category, she disrupts monoracial norms while highlighting her layered cultural and racial background.

However, like Lucia's past challenges or racial rejection, Marvelle acknowledged a past marked by "always hiding parts of myself," revealing a continued dynamic of socially enforced secrecy and deception central to multiracial angst (Kennedy, 2003). Social expectations of secrecy and erasure often compelled Marvelle to downplay parts of her identity, a process she described as emotionally painful. She noted that speaking the "truth" of her identity was liberating, saying, "It was like a weight was lifted."

Marvelle's experience reveals that "fighting" does not always alleviate multiracial exhaustion but remains a chosen response to challenge norms perpetuating it. While she appears willing to educate others about her multicultural background, her efforts are imbued with the emotional labor of resisting the pressures of secrecy and simplifying her identity. This tension highlights how "fighting" serves as both a means of self-expression, a coping mechanism against the demands of the monoracial imperative and a moment to educate.

Palmer, a 55-year-old New Yorker who "proudly identifies as multigenerational-mixed" (MGM), like Marvelle, emphasized the "truth" of his multiracial identity. He explained:

> [There is] no choice in being multiracial. People like to say that I am Black, and that's fine, I get that, but that is not all that I am and when people ask me 'what I am' [uses air quotes, pauses and raises an eyebrow], they don't want to know *all* that I am, and just Black is just not the truth.

Palmer's acknowledgment of being labeled "Black" reflects the concept of "street race," where the ocular dimension dominates racial assessments. Yet, he resists this simplistic categorization, challenging the monoracial imperative and hypodescent's refusal to consider the complexity of multiraciality. Palmer argues the political and social constructs of race, as traditionally framed, often exclude multiracial realities. His advocacy for "truth," then, is about multiracial omission regarding the social construct of race even as "race as a social construct" is liberally used as a way to understand race. This "truth" is included in two self-published books on the MGM experience that Palmer has written and part of a larger project to elevate awareness about multiracial complexity. When asked how he balances this with his career and fatherhood responsibilities, which he also discussed as important, he said:

> You think Black people during civil rights weren't tired? Of course they were! You think I *want* [emphasis theirs] to do it? I have so many hobbies, man. Sometimes I hate it. Sometimes I wish I didn't feel like I had to do it. Like, [looks around jokingly] is there anyone else who can do this?! Sheesh! But it's the truth so we gotta speak it. It's like the song, you know? You gotta fight the power.

Palmer's response encapsulates the exhaustion and determination central to the "fighting" strategy. He draws a parallel between resisting the monoracial imperative and historical struggles for racial justice, conveying a deep sense of obligation despite the emotional toll. While we assess his comparison to the struggle for Black civil rights as perhaps an overreach, an indicator of how so-called "monoracism" has become emergent, it underscores his commitment to illuminating the multiracial community.

Together, these examples—Lucia's anger, Marvelle's measured corrections, and Palmer's persistent advocacy—highlight "fighting" as a primary response to the "What are you?" question and reflect the pattern participants discuss displaying in resisting the monoracial imperative. This resistance is rooted in exhaustion: frustration with reductive questions, hurt from invalidations by friends and family, and disappointment in societal discourse that disregards multiracial lived realities. Despite this fatigue, their actions reflect racial agency—seeking self-definition, educating others about multiraciality, and contributing to a broader sense of community uplift.

Flipping the Question-Playful Resistance to the Monoracial Imperative

Paragg (2017) speculates one response to the "What are you?" experience is playful resistance to what is essentially the white gaze. We, however, show participants "play-on" the question in response to a *monoracial* gaze. Indeed, the "What are you?" question can come from anyone and feel overly interrogative regardless of the asker and their intention. This playful resistance, expressed through "flipping the question," reorients the monoracial gaze back onto the asker and exposes how uncomfortable and confusing racial rules are for *anyone*, particularly when faced with a multiracial person who resists compliance. This act of racial agency highlights the pervasiveness of monoracial assumptions and underscores the asker's struggle to navigate the

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 3, 110-130
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2299

ISSN: 2149-1291

complexity of a reversed premise. Flipping the question thus challenges the monoracial imperative while also creating a temporary psycho-social space for multiracial individuals to protect their emotional well-being and decide whether to engage further or disengage entirely.

Laura, a 22-year-old woman from Northern California who identifies as Black, white, and Asian, exemplifies flipping the "What are you?" question. She admits to sometimes "messing with people" by turning the question back on them, but only when she feels emotionally prepared: "It really depends on my mood... Like, do I have the energy for this right now? Do they really care?" When she chooses to engage, she asks, "What do *you* think I am?" This deliberate inversion reveals their assumptions and often results in asker nervousness: "They get really nervous! [laughs] They get really nervous! It's really funny actually. They're just like, 'oh, I mean, I don't know…' They don't wanna answer 'cause I think that they're afraid they're gonna offend me or something…"

For Laura, flipping is playful, but it is also strategic. Her decision to flip the question underscores the emotional labor tied to these encounters. By redirecting the burden of racial explanation, she resists the monoracial imperative and forces the asker to confront their unpreparedness for racial complexity, which is revealed through their nervousness, fear, and inability to answer. While flipping might appear as a "game" (M. Mills, 2017), Laura's account highlights the underlying emotional toll: "It's hard... because it's, like, usually the first thing people ask about me... But I'm just like, aren't there more interesting things about me besides my race? I don't want to say, like, oh, like, identity crisis, but that's just kind of like how it's felt sometimes." She confesses to feelings of embarrassment and heartbreak, particularly when these interactions make her want to retreat: "I used to not want to go outside and that's heartbreaking to me." Laura's complex emotional confession elucidates there is more going on than just confusion. In fact, her "identity crisis" appears more rooted in social pressure to conform via constant questioning than to any misunderstanding of her multiraciality.

To counter these struggles, Laura channels her experiences into writing children's books about being mixed-race, which she reads in her mom's elementary school classroom. Yet, even in this setting, she encounters monoracial assumptions. Recalling one interaction, she says:

> So I was reading it to them [school children], and then I was like, 'Oh, do you guys like Miss Robinson?' And then they're just like, 'yeah, why?' And I'm like, 'That's my mom.' They're like, 'what?! But you look white?!' I'm like, What?! [laughs] And now it's really awkward now, because [the book] is about accepting yourself, and where do I go from here?

Laura's experience with young children underscores the pervasiveness of the monoracial imperative. While flipping is effective in interactions with peers, classroom encounters with children present a more complex challenge. Nevertheless, her willingness to share her story and book demonstrates commitment to racial agency through self-definition and community uplift, even when faced with discomfort or misunderstanding.

Elsa, a 29-year-old woman of South Asian, Pacific Islander, and Austrian heritage, also had a complex encounter with the monoracial imperative and "the question" in a New England classroom. She recounts a frustrating high school encounter that illuminates power differentials, monoracial assumptions and "street race." Like Palmer, Elsa acknowledges the ocular dimension: "most people see me as just Asian." She recalls when this happened with a teacher who, after seeing Elsa's white mother, asked "the question" and even requested a picture of Elsa's family. "Honestly, it's infuriating to think about, but it's basically just my life [rolls eyes]. I kind of get it… but kinda like, 'how dare you' a little bit." Elsa's response to this intrusive request was

pointed: “I asked to see a picture of her mom, too.” Her teacher, flummoxed, did not understand why Elsa responded that way. Ultimately, uncomfortable and upset, Elsa left the class early to save herself from any further emotional distress.

By flipping the question and demanding the same “proof” from her teacher, Elsa resists the intrusiveness of the monoracial imperative. Her teacher’s confusion highlights how normalized it is not only to assume someone's monoraciality but to then question it in the form of racial proof. The flipping revealed the unpreparedness to face similar scrutiny and incapacity to recognize their failure of socio-emotional awareness. It also temporarily shifts the power dynamics, exposing the one-sidedness of such encounters and giving the multiracial individual a measure of control. Elsa’s decision to leave the class early illustrates that flipping does not always guarantee relief and can leave emotional exhaustion unresolved. However, her initial refusal to comply—her “how dare you” attitude—stands as an assertion of racial agency, challenging unwelcome scrutiny and monoracial assumptions.

One final pattern of flipping the question occurred through a simple question, “What do you mean?” Amna, a 23-year-old woman of Malaysian, Filipino, and Chinese heritage from the Pacific Northwest, and Sally, a woman of Mexican-white heritage from the Midwest now living in California, both report using this question when asked, “What are you?” According to Sally, “Obviously, I know what they mean, but I don’t want to play that game.” Amna echoes the same sentiment, indicating that flipping is not always a moment of lighthearted banter—it can also be a refusal to participate in an exhausting encounter.

Flipping the “What are you?” question is a versatile strategy deployed by multiracial individuals in diverse contexts and with varying emotional undertones. Some use it to underscore the absurdity and invasiveness of the question, while others express frustration by turning the tables to expose the askers’ unexamined assumptions. In all instances, flipping disrupts the monoracial presumption of multiracial deference to the question, resisting the monoracial imperative’s attempts to categorize and simplify. This strategy enables multiracial individuals to assert agency and shield themselves from the pressure to conform to monoracial norms. It creates a temporary psycho-social space, allowing them to manage their emotional well-being amid a barrage of expectations and decide whether to engage further, correct misconceptions, or disengage entirely. While flipping may appear as playful banter or a clever retort, it is a calculated act of resistance and self-preservation. This form of playful resistance serves as a critical coping mechanism to navigate the emotional toll, anxiety, and frustration imposed by the monoracial imperative and exposes it as perhaps quite tenuous when its premises are reversed.

Monoracial Capitulation

A final racial agency strategy for managing multiracial exhaustion is monoracial capitulation. This strategy minimizes the emotional labor required to assert a multiracial identity prioritizing social ease. Unlike passing as white for privilege (Daniel, 1992) or Black to “fit in” (Khanna & Johnson, 2010), monoracial capitulation highlights the demand for single racial categorization because “it’s just easier.” Monoracial capitulation thus can help individuals navigate racialized interactions without disrupting *monoracial ease*, but it also undermines their confidence to articulate their full identity, experiences with racism, and perspectives on race in broader society. Moreover, participant accounts reveal how monoracial assumptions, coupled with the pressure to capitulate, shape perceptions of who is considered an authority on race and who feels (dis)empowered to contribute to discussions about it. Ultimately, monoracial capitulation

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 3, 110-130
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2299

ISSN: 2149-1291

underscores the deep emotional toll of the monoracial imperative and its role in (de)legitimizing *multi*racial agency.

Beau is a 66-year-old community college professor from New England who identifies as triracial Black, white, and Indigenous-Lanape. Beau says he is "pretty much ambiguous" and receives inaccurate racial guesses often. When asked how he responds, Beau explained, "I never correct... In most cases, it's just easier." He elaborated:

> When I am at my Pan-African Caucus and they say 'Hey, brother!' What, am I supposed to stop them and say, 'Well, actually, I'm only a third your brother?!' And with my white friends, they never really say anything… If it comes up, it's not like… [pauses] you know, like, classic passing is to deny it. 'Oh, no, not me.' You know, I don't do that.

For Beau, expressing his full identity would disrupt the the monoracial norm. By introducing multiracial complexity it would create monoracial unease. This is important because it unsettles commonly held presumptions that multiracial people are "confused" as Beau is clear that social ease is the purpose of his capitulation. Furthermore, his rationale for doing so appears explicitly related to the benefit of *the group*. By capitulating, Beau avoids the burden of explanations, alleviating social disruption. Moreover, Beau felt little confliction about his approach.

> It's just the way it is. Is it great? No. Could it be better? Yes. Could I do things different? Sure…but I'm an easygoing guy. Maybe it's my generation. I don't know, but it's the chameleon thing and I know that's supposed to be bad or whatever but that's me, for sure, and I don't mind. It just makes things easier.

Beau's perspective reflects resignation to the monoracial norm: "It's just the way it is." However, his "easygoing" disposition is an important detail. It allows him to prioritize group harmony over individual expression, presenting capitulation as both a personal privilege and a social benefit. Beau's comfort, however, belies the complexity of these types of situations.

For example, Hawke, a 24-year-old Black-white biracial man raised on the West Coast and educated on the East Coast, places a high value on discussing race and addressing racism with his white peers. In these interactions, he often presents himself as monoracially Black, believing it grants him credibility:

> If I say mixed or multiracial or biracial or whatever, there is doubt and... you are their gateway, their experience into what it means to be a Black person. So, it's like my interaction with this person, if I have a positive interaction with them, that could change their opinion on almost everything.

Hawke feels a deep sense of responsibility to the Black community. Twine (2010) describes this as "racial literacy," where Black parents educate others, typically white parents and multiracial children, about Black culture and how to fight anti-Black racism. Critically, part of racial literacy is the rule of hypodescent for which Hawke capitulates. However, this monoracial capitulation comes at a psychic cost. It erases his white father from his racial identity, reinforces monoracial norms, and forgoes the opportunity to introduce complexity into the conversation, something Hawke shared he wrestles with deeply.

In fact, despite his dedication to Black racial literacy, the cumulative pressure of the choice between secrecy and deception (Kennedy, 2003) or expressing his full mixed-race identity led Hawke to despair. He confessed, "I used to be like, I don't want to do this anymore. Author: Do

what? What do you mean? Hawke: Life!" This stark admission of suicidal thoughts highlights the devastating mental health implications of the monoracial imperative. Suicidal thoughts were not a recurrent theme, only a sporadic one. However, discussions about therapy, depression, and isolation, which Hawke also discussed, were. Lamentations about the difficulty in finding therapists who understand the mixed-race experience was a recurring pattern.

One such participant who found a therapist which helped him immensely was Matteo, a 39-year-old man from Texas who identifies as Mixed Costa Rican. He described his mother as "mostly white-passing" while his father is "obviously Black." Despite his fluency in Spanish and his "Hispanic-sounding name," familial pressure pushed Matteo to identify monoracially as "just white." This left him feeling isolated from family, community and conflicted about his heritage.

The complexity of this came to a head after an incident at the airport involving his father. The family interpreted the incident as racist, and his brothers, whom he described as "all darker than me," tried to interject while Matteo remained silent. Initially, he did not consider his inaction significant, but grew more troubled by it over time. With the support of his then-fiancé, he entered into therapy and took a genetic ancestry test (GAT), confirming to him he was more than "just white." Doing this gave him the courage to begin identifying as mixed and confronting his family about their actions growing up. He also began unpacking many racialized experiences he had previously ignored. In reflecting on the airport incident specifically, he said:

> I felt like I don't deserve to be upset about this, or I don't deserve to have feelings about this. I would say there's probably been lots of instances like that, that I've learned to either roll with or, yeah... I'm realizing the whole white identity crisis thing... I'm only recently now starting to remember and I'm starting to get, like, pissed off.

The familial pressure to identify as white conveyed to Matteo, amongst many things, that he had no right to feel anger, engage in racial discourse, or intervene when he witnessed racism. In his view, monoracial whiteness meant he should remain detached, as if the moral and emotional responsibility to react to racism did not belong to him. This reveals that a consequence of monoracial capitulation is related to who is "allowed" to be affected by, discuss, and intervene regarding racism. By capitulating to monoracial categorization, Matteo's racial agency was stifled and his emotional responses suppressed. His admission of being "pissed off" and seeking therapy underscores that monoracial whiteness, often framed solely as beneficial under the "passing" narrative, can have profound negative emotional consequences because of presumed rules of race. This is in important contrast to Hawke, who felt he could only be a legitimate racial agent when he monoracial capitulates as Black. The pattern, then, is that monoraciality is necessary for racial literacy.

These examples reveal how monoracial capitulation influences perceptions of credibility and racial agency. For Beau, capitulation is just "the way it is," which suits his personality but highlights monoracial ease as normative. For Hawke, capitulation to Blackness grants him legitimacy in addressing racism, while Matteo's capitulation to whiteness via his familial pressure made invisible the norm of white silence around racism, even when it impacts people as near as a father. These narratives expose how the monoracial imperative, enforced through capitulation, shapes who feels empowered to confront racism and who feels silenced. Most importantly, perhaps, it highlights the psycho-social trauma, which can manifest as simply a need for therapy but may be as serious as suicidal thoughts.

Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies
2025, Vol.12, No. 3, 110-130
http://dx.doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/2299

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Discussion

The policy implications of these data could be broad. Yet, there are three things we believe are most urgent: (1) moving away from so-called "monoracism" towards the monoracial imperative, (2) increasing the number of mental health workers who identify as multiracial or specialize in multiracial identity, and (3) promoting a more careful and sophisticated approach to the "what are you?" question. We discuss this before concluding.

The concept of "monoracism"—various microaggressions faced by multiracial individuals (Johnston & Nadal, 2010)—has gained traction (Harris, 2016; Harris et al., 2015), but its rise is concerning. While we certainly agree and acknowledge the impact of microaggressions on multiracial people as it is a central part of this study, the term lacks nuance and risks creating a binary between monoracial and multiracial identities. Notably, it suggests an alignment between monoracial whites and Blacks in their prejudice against mixed-race people (Harris et al. 2015; Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020), without fully addressing the distinct reasons behind this perceived alignment. The monoracial imperative offers a more nuanced explanation, indicating that monoracial whites may seek to preserve racial hierarchies, while monoracial people of color, especially Black individuals, do so for community solidarity and safety. Daniel (2021) identifies this as a "critical distinction" (p. 110). Therefore, we propose moving away from the current understanding of monoracism and adopting the monoracial imperative to better address the complexities of multiracial experiences. If used, monoracism should reflect frustration with monoracial indifference rather than framing whites, Blacks, and other monoracial groups as uniformly aligned against multiracial people for the same reasons.

Such a conversation is important because it begins a larger one about how to engage, starting with the language we use and the potential mental health issues we believe are related to Adverse Childhood Experiences. If ACEs scores are an indicator of a true emerging mental health crisis among multiracial people, then a call for greater literacy among mental health practitioners, perhaps more multiracial identifying practitioners, and more discussion about how to support multiracial people who seek counseling should be the primary concern.

Additionally, recognizing *multi*racial literacy—that is, the idea that multiracial people and their experiences offer unique knowledge that is critical to understanding race in America—is both paramount and urgent. The rapidly changing racial landscape only heightens this urgency. Lastly, recognizing that edge cases—while certainly worrying—are indeed marginal and thus far less worthy of our collective attention than the millions of experiences of multiracial people is needed. Their lives should be the central narrative.

Finally, it is unrealistic to expect people to stop asking "the question," given the human impulse and in many cases, necessity, to categorize. However, we advocate for a more thoughtful approach when posing or responding to this question. It is essential to consider factors such as the perceived race of the asker ("street race"), vocal tone, timing (appropriateness of the moment), familiarity, and demographics like gender, sexuality, class, and religion. In essence, interpersonal dynamics must be taken into account. Additionally, before asking, one should also reflect: "Why do I care about this?" Despite attempts at careful and sensitive questioning, many multiracial individuals still perceive the question as a microaggression or even racist, leading to unintended harm. To mitigate this, the most important guidance we can give is to accept whatever the multiracial individual shares without invalidating responses such as, "You don't look like that!" or "I would have never guessed." Though often well-meaning, such remarks can be, and often are, perceived as dismissive and harmful. A more respectful response might be, "If you're open to

discussing it, I'd love to hear more about your experiences, but if not, that's okay too." This approach expresses interest while granting agency and avoids imposing racial expectations. Ultimately, the multiracial community and the individuals in them appear to simply seeking acceptance of their racial experiences and inclusion in discussions about racial life in the United States. Implementing these approaches may foster more inclusive interactions.

Conclusion

This study highlights how the monoracial imperative impacts multiracial individuals, primarily through the persistent "What are you?" question. We show that the question—used as a proxy for the monoracial imperative—intensifies what we term "multiracial exhaustion." Our analysis of 43 semi-structured interviews from those who self-identify as two or more races, are from across the gender spectrum and represent every region in the United States, and reveals that this exhaustion does not stem from individual confusion. Instead, it arises from a societal pressure for monoracial identification, often at the cost of mental well-being. Participants use three distinct strategies—fighting, flipping, and monoracial capitulation—to illustrate the complexity of *multi*racial agency under these constraints. Whether through directly resisting, playfully inverting, or reluctantly adhering to monoracial norms, the emotional and psychological toll of managing their racial agency within society is illuminated.

By highlighting the Black/white binary but empirically operationalizing the monoracial imperative for the first time, these findings challenge us to reconsider the emerging theory in multiracial studies known as "monoracism." We argue that monoracism risks establishing a new binary between monoracial and multiracial identities, reflecting but not effectively addressing, concerns about the United States moving closer to the Latin-American model of race. Instead, the monoracial imperative offers a more nuanced explanation by highlighting a "critical distinction," that monoracial whites and Blacks may engage "the question" similarly in interaction but likely for very different reasons. Monoracial whites do so for maintenance of racial hierarchies while monoracial people of color, especially Black communities, do so as a means of protective gatekeeping for solidarity and safety. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for advancing a more sophisticated understanding of multiracial identity that not only transcends overly simplistic binaries but helps address structural dimensions of racial marginalization. Critically, however, we show that the consequence of the question, regardless of the asker, may be the same—trauma and exhaustion. A point that, we argue, lies at the heart of the reason why monoracism emerged, even if we disagree with its foregoing use. Our hope is that by elevating these dynamics and distinctions, it moves us in a new, more nuanced direction.

Ultimately, this study calls for a paradigm shift in how multiracial identity is perceived and discussed. It advocates for recognizing multiracial mental health needs, training more multiracial mental health practitioners, and engaging more thoughtfully with the "What are you?" question. By accepting multiracial identities without invalidation or dismissal, we can begin to if not dismantle then better understand and navigate the monoracial imperative and create an inclusive and empathetic discourse on race that is more inclusive of multiracial lives.

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Notes on Contributors

Ian Anthony is a sociologist specializing in race, gender, and spiritualities. He is currently completing his Ph.D. at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His dissertation examines how multiracial individuals respond to societal pressures to conform to single racial categories. In addition to his research on multiracial identity, Anthony investigates the spiritual community's relationship to religion and science. Some of that work recently appeared in *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*. He is also the founder of the MIRROR research group, supporting undergraduates in doing high-level sociological scholarship, for which this study is a product.

Zirui Zhou is a master's student at the University of Chicago studying race, ethnicity, and immigration. He graduated with high honors and distinction in his major from the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), in 2024, with majors in Sociology and Communication. His research focuses on how ethnicity, race, class, and migration histories shape identity construction.

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His current project examines how Asian immigrants navigate ethnic and panethnic identities, using qualitative methods to explore the role of education, class, social interactions, and migration experiences in shaping identity.

Braden Artzer holds a degree in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is currently pursuing a degree in Conservation Biology and Ecology at Arizona State University. His past research focused on racial identity and multiracial mental health. In addition to academic research, Braden manages community restoration projects and leads educational outings for a nonprofit, working to expand access to biology, ecology, and conservation for diverse audiences.

Allyson Zuleta holds a degree in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara. While at UCSB, she worked closely with families and students, contributing to research aimed at translating findings into policy and practice for educational reform through the Center for Publicly Engaged Scholars. Currently, Allyson serves as a Family Advocate at the Stanislaus County Office of Education, where she helps families access essential community resources. She is also pursuing graduate studies focused on college and career aspirations for adolescents in rural areas.

Karissa Low is a graduate student at the University of Chicago, pursuing her master's in clinical social work. She is projected to graduate in the spring of 2025. She is being trained as a psychotherapist in third-wave behavioral therapies, specifically Contextually Focused Dialectical Behavior Therapy (C-DBT), and specializes in working with chronically distressed individuals. Karissa received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 2022.

ORCID

Ian Anthony, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2223-8741
Zirui Zhou, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5859-1212
Braden Artzer, https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3230-9136
Allyson Zuleta-Alonzo, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7383-602X
Karissa Low, https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6799-7034