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Half-Asian? Half-Valid?: An Autoethnographic Account of the Situational Mixed-race Experience

Julia Orticio

University College Maastricht—juliaorticio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic study uses the researcher's personal racialized experiences to illuminate the complexities of being mixed-race. Understanding one's own identity is crucial to positioning oneself in the world and experiencing one's surroundings. For mixed-race individuals, understanding oneself becomes more difficult and nuanced as compared to monoracial groups. The mixed experience is marked with struggles with racial ambiguity, rejection from racial communities, and racial performativity. Feelings, including invalidation, self-doubt, discrimination, and longing for community often arise, prompting an investigation as to what it feels like to carry a mixed-race identity. This study contributes to the field of race and identity studies, exploring mixed-race identity from a first-hand perspective. Through three main frames of analysis: 1) perception of mixed-race by others, 2) internalization of invalidity, and 3) understanding the contextuality of the mixed identity, this paper delves into how identity is constructed uniquely for mixed-race individuals. Findings from this paper provide insight to the situational experience of mixed-race individuals.

Keywords: mixed-race, racial ambiguity, everyday racism, autoethnography

What are you? And honestly, many times I have come up short.

With people constantly in my ear telling me what I am and claiming I am not what I say, it becomes difficult to differentiate what my 'truth' really is. I question myself: Am I minimizing my Asian features with this makeup? Am I overcompensating for my 'lack of culture' by acting like I have more ties to Asian culture than I do? Does my background as an American with a white mom render me incompetent to speak on racial issues? These questions are a direct result of my identity as mixed-race—an identity that is almost contested by people constantly pushing me into boxes.

Being mixed-race comes with different struggles than those of monoracial people. Issues such as identity formation, feeling a sense of belonging in a community, and familial relations all become more difficult with a combination of ethnicities. Assumed safe havens for identity, such as family or ethnic student associations, become negotiated territory for mixed-race individuals, as their membership is always contingent. Thus, the idea for this research was sparked.

Purpose and Relevance

Through this paper, I present an autoethnographic case of first-hand experience of being a mixed-race Asian American living across two continents: North America and Europe. I aim to research the mixed experience through discussing prior theory and providing my own experiences. Seeing that mixed-race identity is relatively new and that in both of my countries of residence we are such a small minority, this topic feels incredibly important to shed light on. Self-identifying multiracial individuals make up only 6.9% of the U.S. population—a category which was not added to the census until 2000 (Parker et al. 2015; U.S. Census Bureau 2023). In the Netherlands, racial demographic information is not presently available—thus, mixed-race is not yet considered a racial category. Future generations are predicted to have higher demographics of multiracial-identifying individuals, making research on understanding the mixed experience increasingly important

What are you? *A girl.* No, what are you? Uh, *I'm six years old.* No, what are you? *Asian and white?* Is that what you're asking? Yeah! But no, you *can't* be Asian. Your eyes aren't small enough. You look Mexican. *Well, my dad is from the Philippines and my mom is white, from Oklahoma.* No! You look Hispanic and your last name also sounds Mexican! Everyone, doesn't she look Hispanic? She can't be Asian!

From the age of six, I was already being questioned about my identity. My innocent kindergartener friends would notice that I did not 'look like anything' to them and would berate me with propositions of what my ethnic background appeared to be for them. I have stood on the sidelines of infinite debates about whether I look Asian or Hispanic (which people on either side feel oddly passionate about), not knowing what to say after my input about my true ethnic composition had been ignored.

Eventually, I made a game out of it myself. Asking people "where do you think I am from?" has almost become a fun party trick for me. I never really took offense to all the background murmur about my identity, and it seems as though I internalized my ambiguity enough to use it for clout. I guess if everyone else were going to make a joke about how I don't look like my ethnicity, I may as well be the one posing it.

As I grow older and have encountered more and more incidents of discrimination based on my racialized identity, I have grown tired of these games. It feels like there is no need to add another dimension of invalidation to my mixed-race experience—I can only hear "but you don't look Asian!" so many times. At different stages of my life, I have paused and looked inwards to hopefully reveal the answer to the looming question in the back of my mind:

(Parker et al. 2015).

While the literature on mixed-race identities is a rapidly growing field, autoethnographic studies remain few. Furthermore, being mixed-race and living across two continents provides new and valuable insight to the true contextuality of the mixed identity—something seldom researched. This study can be used to delve further into international comparisons of the treatment of racial differences, helping to obtain a proper understanding of a country's policies and attitudes towards race through understanding first-hand experiences.

More personally, writing a paper about the experiences of being mixed-race feels empowering and validating to the struggles that I (and other mixed-race people) have gone through. Hearing other stories from mixed-race authors or discovering research over mixed-race struggles has always felt comforting and made me feel seen. Representation, even in academia, can provide groups with feelings of validation. Moreover, writing from first-hand experience on a niche identity allows for those outside of the mixed-race identity to more deeply understand what it entails to be mixed. Therefore, through contributing to the pool of mixed-race literature, I aspire to change perspectives on mixed-race experiences and shed light on the complexities of such an identity.

Methodology

To conduct this research, autoethnographic methods were used. Autoethnography can be understood as a mix between traditional ethnography and narrative methods. It includes the researcher's feelings, experiences, and opinions in the scope of research, using this data to study and explain social phenomena (Cooper and Lilyea 2022; Poulos 2021). Through an analysis of self, autoethnographies illuminate societal practices and how they manifest on a micro level (Poulos 2021). Thus, autoethnography fosters a deeper cultural understanding of self and others (Chang 2008). In the context of this research, autoethnography was the most suitable method. An analysis of self translates to an analysis of the entire social group—illuminating

the experiences of identity and struggles for mixed-race people in society.

For data collection, I primarily utilized self-written memos on my personal experiences with race and discrimination. Coincidentally, I have kept journals of my daily experiences since May 2019, providing raw data on my feelings and experiences in the moments of certain incidents with my racial identity. I was additionally able to retrieve raw data in the form of Instagram posts, where I detail my feelings regarding my identity following specific events or conversations on the topic. Through adopting the suggested method of Cooper and Lilyea (2022) to 'over-include' in the data collection process, I have not left out any feelings and allowed myself post-collection to sift through and pick out the most significant findings. Prior to the writing process, I began writing detailed memos covering my feelings and experiences at different stages of my life, which make up most of the data that is analyzed here.

Finally, the autoethnographic process can also be incredibly transformative for the author (Chang 2008). Autoethnography has offered me the opportunity to study and understand my own feelings. I could position myself and reassure my own identity throughout the writing process, changing my own life through conducting research. Reading and analyzing prior theory through the lens of my personal stories has both called my assumptions into question and affirmed my identity, making it so I am not only *researching*, but *being* researched. Overall, the process of data collection, literature review, and data analysis has enabled me to reflect on and understand my racial identity on a level I had not yet achieved.

Theoretical Background

Understanding Identity

Identity and ethnicity are terms central to this research and thus warrant a definition and explanation of their significance. As explained by Lawler (2015), identity refers to a plethora of phenomena: how one sees themselves, how others perceive them, one's reactions to those perceptions, and one's relations to social categories. While all of these reflect one's

identity, they are not inherently the same; perceptions of self (personal identity) may be vastly different from perception by others (social identity). Thus, our social identity, or an identity one has via connections to social categories, is primarily positioned upon us based on our physical features (Lawler 2015). One component of one's social identity is their ethnic group, determined by perceived ethnicity.

Ethnicity, a component of our identities, relates to our cultural heritage or background. It can be defined as a "context-specific, social construct...that describes group characteristics (e.g., culture, nativity) and...indexes a group's location within a social hierarchy (e.g., minority vs. majority status)" (Ford and Harawa 2010, 1). Ethnicity differs from race in the different categories that can be embodied but is related in that ethnic groups are often perceived to fall under a few racial boxes including Black, White, Asian, Latino, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous. These categories differ depending on national contexts, but the present research focused on American racial differentiations.

Further, ethnicity is largely emotional. Understanding our identity allows us to understand ourselves, and ethnic background allows us to understand our cultural roots and what ties us to our family or cultural community (if applicable). This process of identity formation and understanding is a task we are met with starting in early childhood, as we subconsciously strive for cohesion and sense of self. Ethnic-racial identity, or ERI, has become an indicator of the strength of one's connection to their identity. It "encompasses the process and content that defines an individual's sense of self related to ethnic heritage and racial background, [including] labels individuals use to define themselves according to ethnicity/race; awareness, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge they have about their ethnic-racial background" (Umaña-Taylor et al. 2014). Several studies have looked at the impacts of high and low ERI, crystallizing the emotional impact of having a strong sense of ethnic identity. In a 2022 study, ERI was found to be a salient dimension of stable sense of self among adolescents (Booth et al. 2022). Further, high ERI was proven to moderate adolescents' self-esteem and reactions to (racial) discrimination

(Marks et al 2015). Evidently, knowing where one belongs is a critical step in coming to terms with oneself.

Specifically, indications of a sense of belonging to a racial or ethnic group proved to be of great importance among youth of color (Lee et al. 2022). The positive impacts of belonging manifested themselves in higher academic achievements, greater self-worth, greater coping abilities with racial stress, and fewer depressive symptoms for college students of color (Lee et al. 2022). Moreover, Lardier (2018) analyzed the experiences of Black and Hispanic youth in their identities, finding that belonging in and participating in an identity-based community increased psychological empowerment. Thus, an understanding of oneself can influence belonging and community involvement, which is important in youth development and empowerment.

Questions of Mixed Identity and Belonging

Mixed-race individuals, or those with multiple ethnic or racial backgrounds, undergo different identity formation or understanding processes than monoracial groups. Due to racial ambiguity — one's appearance not adhering to the standards of any race completely — mixed-race people often have more difficulties grasping their ethnic identity. This lack of self-understanding coupled with possible rejection by their own in-groups creates an interesting space for mixed-race groups — one of negotiated territory. To understand the experiences of mixed-race individuals in coming to terms with their identities, the following section reviews prior literature and theory on mixed-race struggles.

Ambiguity

As previously discussed, physical appearances play a large role in how identity is interpreted (Lawler 2015). Thus, when physical appearances are *mis*interpreted, individuals' understanding of themselves may rupture. For mixed-race people specifically, phenotypic features can play an important role in identity, considering that 'what are you?' questions are commonplace in their everyday lives (Paragg 2017). With their ambiguous appearance, the ethnicity or race of mixed-race individuals may not be clear to onlookers. This is especially the

case considering many people may conceptualize race as an either/or dichotomy, rendering mixed faces as ambiguous or an outlier because they do not fit the norm (Chen and Hamilton 2012). Then, when such dichotomized racialized identities are projected onto such people, social identity may not align with personal or ego identity. Not only can this incompatibility create feelings of crisis within the individual, but the ambiguity of the individual causes them to be categorized as out-group members.

Willadsen-Jensen and Ito (2006) studied the social categorization of mixed-race Asian ambiguous faces by monoracial individuals. Findings indicated that in cases where social category membership was ambiguous, individuals were classified as out-group members (Willadsen-Jensen and Ito, 2006). Even in cases where faces were initially perceived as similar to white faces, they were not viewed as *explicitly* white and thus were differentiated from both Asian and white groups (Willadsen-Jensen and Ito 2006). Racially ambiguous faces were then categorized in neither group, but as some differentiated 'Other.'

Membership

Regarding belonging and positioning oneself in an ethnic community, it is not uncommon for mixed-race individuals to experience rejection. With racial ambiguity and standards of acceptance to an ethnic group, membership may be denied based on not being 'enough' of the ethnicity at hand. Racial community boundaries may be abstract and hard to define, but certainly mixed-race individuals have negotiated claims to these communities at best—often not being considered a part of the in-group at all (Campion 2019). This is what Campion (2019) referred to as 'horizontal hostility,' or the process of boundary making that places mixed-race individuals outside of the imagined racial space. Living without membership in a community then has negative impacts on individuals and their self-perception of identity, calling attention to another deep struggle of being mixed-race.

Within racial groups, certain standards are subconsciously in place that regulate who is considered an insider vs. outsider (Tate 2005). These standards can include linguistic

background, cultural habits, religious affiliation, and physical traits. For example, Tate (2005) found that the Black community finds unification in mutuality, identification, and feeling. Further, admittance into this community relies on bearing the marks of the collective, being recognized and accepted by others, and surrendering oneself to the identity (Tate 2005). Therefore, membership into a community is largely dependent on the perceptions of and recognition by others. Here, issues may arise for mixed-race groups, as recognition is never guaranteed.

Phenotypic ambiguity is one of the primary predictors of rejection of membership to a racial community. Acceptance of ethnic authenticity may require certain physical features, such as hair type or skin color (Gilbert 2005). Evidently, these qualifications of membership are not accommodating to the visual spectrum of being mixed-race, leading to rejection of membership because of physical features. Mixed-race people's physical ambiguity may render them different from the rest of their ethnic in-group, giving the perception of allegiances or alignment to other out-groups more so than the in-group (Franco and Holmes 2017). Going further than ambiguity, mixed-race people are often also rejected because of not being 'enough' to be seen as an insider.

As proposed by Tate (2005), exclusionary practices by racial communities often leave mixed-race people to fend for themselves, without acceptance of their identity. Tate posed the question: "What could 'the Black community' be for those who are denied a place within it because of the exclusionary practices of a Black politics of skin?" (Tate 2005, 152). Interviewees in Tate's research also held that their 'in-group' has directly caused them feelings of alienation or self-doubt, vilifying racial communities for their exclusionary tendencies. The central question of membership seems to ask 'who is *really* x identity,' which can invalidate the identities of mixed-race individuals by assuming that being mixed is not enough (Tate 2005). It seems that the power is in the hands of the 'wholes' rather than the 'halves,' as the "declaration of one's ethnicity is an insufficient explanation to

resolve others' preconceived notions of racial phenotypes" (Asami Smith 2021, 1). Accepted members of an ethnic community are given the pedestal to deem one worthy (or not) of membership—causing mixed-race individuals to be left with no community.

Not only do mixed-race people experience rejection from their ethnic groups, but they also are forced to live in a gray area of being 'not enough.' Asami Smith (2021) wrote on her experiences discussing racial issues as a mixed-race Asian and white woman:

I found myself in a double-bind: I was simultaneously perceived as too white to carry my own traumas surrounding racism, yet too yellow and too Other to explain racism without it coming off as an out-group accusation of wrongdoing. (42)

Neither community of Asami Smith's identity groups accepted her as their own, leading her to not be categorized as anything but othered, too much, or not enough. Therefore, Asami Smith found herself in a forcefully 'neutral' zone, not granted membership to her identity in-groups. This is what Franco and Holmes (2017) would refer to as racial homelessness, or the lack of a racial home. A racial home provides one with "belonging, identity development, and a place to cope with racial stressors," giving one an identity and community to feel at home with (Franco and Holmes 2017, 13). A lack of such racial home (or being in this gray area) then hampers mixed-race people's psychological well-being and hinders their racial identity development (Asami Smith 2021; Franco and Holmes 2017).

Evidently, lack of admittance of membership into racial communities leaves mixed-race people in a gray area, missing the sense of belonging that they crave (Asami Smith 2021; Tate 2005). Lacking a community and sense of belonging, it is also common for mixed-race people to overcompensate and perform their race while seeking validation by their respective in-groups.

Racial Performativity

Just as Judith Butler (1993) famously claimed that gender is performed, many authors have deduced that race or ethnicity are similarly

performed rather than being natural. Racial performativity thus explains the phenomena in which race or ethnicity is "something that has to be acted out and constantly reproduced in everyday life" (Clammer 2015, 2159). Meaning is given to race through performances including clothing, hairstyles, accents, music taste, and even body language (Clammer 2015). These performances then grant one's membership into racial groups, as we subconsciously label others, categorizing them into racial categories. With this, we may perform (or over perform) our race in accordance with societal standards to conform or fit in.

Racial performativity is also highly contextual. Fitting into one's race may mean completely different things in different cultural contexts, meaning monoracial and multiracial people alike may have to adapt their performance to their settings. In a 2023 study on Black and mixed-Black women's hairstyling practices, it was found that women often changed their hairstyles in accordance with their ethnic surroundings (Lukate and Foster 2023). Hair proved itself to be a significant indicator of ethnic performance. For example, participant Kimberly explained how when she visited the United States, she began to straighten her hair regularly, whereas in her home country of Germany, she did not feel the pressure to keep her hair straight to fit in (Lukate and Foster 2023). So, based on the cultural context of one's surroundings, one performs their ethnicity differently to conform. For mixed-race groups, this is highly relevant, as there may be more pressure to perform to ameliorate chances of acceptance.

Conformation to the norms of a racial community determines how one experiences themselves as insiders or outsiders to the community (Tate 2005). As indicated in research by Tate (2005), Black biracial participants are rejected by or feel ostracized in the Black community because they lack 'complete conformity' to the group. Franco and Holmes (2017) suggested a complex relationship "whereby Biracial people may simultaneously be rejected as and pressured to be [more of their race]" (Franco and Holmes 2017, 13). This dynamic puts pressure on mixed-race people to prove their worth through presenting

themselves as 'more' of their own race(s). Therefore, racial performativity becomes over-performativity in a sense, as individuals overcompensate to seek validation.

Campion (2019) further reported on racial performativity through the example of interviewee Anthony, a biracial Black and white man. Within his (mostly Black) social circle, Anthony got teased for being mixed-race, as his friends would make negative comments about him being light-skin or having a white mom (Campion 2019). Due to his exclusion in Black circles growing up, Anthony decided, "From now on I'm only going out with Black or mixed girls—simple as that" (Campion 2019, 208). To gain full membership to the Black community, Anthony felt the need to alter his performance in whom he interacted with and dated, exemplifying the hoops that mixed people must jump through to be considered an insider.

Overcompensation, or actively trying to prove your ethnic identity through conforming to the norms of a community, proves to be a common experience for mixed-race individuals. The mixed experience is lived on negotiated territory, and acceptance into racial communities is dependent on recognition and validation by the in-group. Therefore, it only follows that a longing for belonging would result in racial performativity to finally be accepted into the desired community.

Through exploring the implications of identity and ethnicity on well-being and growth, it has been established that the feelings of self and others largely impact how individuals understand themselves. Following this, mixed-race people undergo different processes in forming their identities, as they are confronted with issues with racial ambiguity, membership, and racial performativity to experience belonging. Overall, identity is incredibly important for how individuals conduct their lives, making it crucial to understand what identity can mean for those with multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Through the process of researching this topic, my own experiences have been immensely relevant. The mixed-race experience is one that is my own—these struggles are not news to me but rather researched descriptions

of my lived experiences. Thus, to provide insight into these experiences and illuminate the ins and outs of mixed-race life, the next section illustrates my personal experiences and how they can be applied to research on all mixed-race identifying individuals.

Self-Analysis

My father grew up in the Philippines, having 100% Filipino ancestry and cultural background. He moved to the United States when he was a 21-years-old on a scholarship to study in Washington, D.C. A couple of years later, he met my mother in Washington, D.C. My mother is fully White, having distant German and Irish ancestry but primarily identifying as a White American. I am the youngest of three kids and lived my entire life in Dallas, Texas, until moving to the Netherlands to attend university (Figure



Figure 1: Family photo, 2004. Photo courtesy of the author.

1).

To put my experiences into context, it is crucial to provide some background about my social situation. Growing up and throughout high school, I lived in an incredibly ethnically diverse area. My high school of almost 2,500 students had 88.4% minority enrollment, meaning I was always immersed in diversity (U.S. News & World Report 2022). I had only one or two white friends, and my closest friends were Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Indian, Thai, Mexican, and Indian-Mexican. At different points in my teenage years, I operated within primarily Asian spaces, as the program I was in at my school had a large Asian presence. This drastically changed when moving to the Netherlands. Here, I can count the number of

persons of color (POC) students I know on one hand, only really being close to two or three POC total (some of whom I specifically sought out because of their racial background). On a daily basis, I may not even speak to another POC, and I function in almost entirely white spaces.

My ethnic composition is half Filipino and half White (ethnically German and Irish, which I have no cultural connection to), thus making me biracial. I interpret my own identity primarily as a racialized one (Asian), but also feel connected to my Filipino ancestry because of my cultural experiences. I would not identify as White, because I feel that this is reductionist to my vast experiences as a POC. Being White is still a part of my identity, as it has defined my experiences, but I have never felt that I would identify as monoracially white. I would, however, consider myself Asian and would say that I fit in more with Asian groups (when accepted). Though at the forefront of my identity, I hold that I am mixed, feeling both Asian and white rather than exclusively one or the other.

Having a mixed-race identity means innumerable instances of questioning one's identity. From early childhood, questions of who I am have hovered over my consciousness. The perceptions of others have permeated my own sense of self, causing misunderstandings even internally. Following the misconstrued perceptions of others, I have internalized such inaccuracies, questioning my own membership in the communities I felt that I belonged to. With these feelings following me around throughout all stages of life, I have come to several realizations and have begun to understand my positioning in society. Thus, the following section discusses my own experience being mixed-race, providing an account of the struggles of mixed-race individuals.

I have chosen to discuss my experiences in three main parts: perception, internalization, and status. First, the gaze of the 'wholes' is discussed, or how monoracial people perceive my identity or who I am. Second, I write on the impact of such perceptions to my internal self-image, causing me to overperform my race. Finally, I note the contextual and situational status of mixed-race identities from my

perspective, prompting a conclusion on how one can interpret the experiences of being mixed-race.

Perception: The Gaze of the 'Wholes'

My ethnicity has been a topic of debate for as long as I can remember. Whether it was at school, family gatherings, or in random public spaces, people around me always felt the need to discuss what I looked like. Indian? Mexican? Vietnamese? Brazilian? Thai? There was never an agreement on 'what I was,' and answers were seldom accurate. My racial ambiguity has subjected me to countless questions of 'what are you?,' with comments that I 'look more ___' and 'no, you can't be!' In fact, even when explicitly laying out my ethnic heritage, I was often told I was wrong, because my physical appearance did not fit what others thought it should have. I felt I was always under the jurisdiction of other people's power and gaze, them having the right to tell me who I am. I wanted to be able to define myself but was simultaneously denied this right, leading me to take the perceptions of others to heart. Thus, one of the most significant parts of the mixed experience is the lack of belonging prompted by rejections from in-groups.

Rejection from In-Groups

My claims to my identity seem to always be made on negotiated territory. Who I claim to be is almost never who others see me as, giving power to others to define my identity and categorize me accordingly. Not only were outsiders telling me what I was and was not, but those who I would consider insiders would do the same—rejecting me as one of them.

Though I tend to not even categorize myself as White, it is more than obvious that I am rejected by White communities. From childhood, I have felt odd when I did not racially fit into my surroundings — marking my difference from Whiteness. Within my own family, my grandmother has referred to my brothers and me as her 'exotic grandchildren,' evidently not grouping us as the same racially as she is. At my high school job, my White coworkers would constantly refer to me as the 'smart Asian girl'. Since moving to Europe, I have been stared at and pointed at without explanation, leaving me to believe I am noticed for my deviation from seemingly normative

White aesthetics. All throughout my existence, my Whiteness has been rejected.

Similarly, and more impactfully, I am also not admitted into the Asian communities around me. I see myself as Asian in that my life experiences have been racialized ones, and my ethnicity drives me to my Asian side. I even find comfort in Asian friends or groups based on our shared connection to Asian culture. However, through countless instances with 'wholly' Asian friends, families, and strangers, it is clear that my social identity does not permit me to fully belong in Asian circles. In middle and high school (ages 11-17), I coincidentally found myself in majority Asian friend groups. While I felt that I connected to these friends because of our shared racial backgrounds, I was often confronted with the fact that they did not consider me one of them. Once, while hanging out at an Asian bakery with two of my Vietnamese friends, I asked a question about one of the Taiwanese pastries, as it was not something I was familiar with considering my Filipino background. One friend turned to the other, laughed, and then told me, "No offense, Julia, but you're not *really* Asian". My two friends then proceeded to have a whole discussion on the different elements of Asian culture that I was lacking. That day, I came home raging — I couldn't understand why I was being ridiculed and excluded for not knowing something about Taiwanese pastries when I'm not even Taiwanese. I felt unrecognized and unvalued, and upset that it seemed that they did not see me the same way they saw each other.

The rejection from Asian communities hit even harder when it was Filipino communities that excluded me. When I visited my family in the Philippines at the age of 10, I experienced an immense feeling of being an outsider. The country and family I expected to find a home in considered me a foreigner, opening their arms to an 'other' rather than one of them. I was often praised by relatives for my light skin, larger eyes, and more Western nose, always being told I could be a celebrity with such features. I am American, of course, so I would interpret such comments as a sort of fawning over American *tourists* (which I was not) rather than a dig at my ethnic identity. However, the ethnic rejection did not stop with Filipinos living

in the Philippines, as Filipino-Americans were seemingly crueler.



Figure 2: My family at a Filipino gathering, 2018.

Even visibly, it always seemed obvious that my brothers, mom, and I did not fit into gatherings with other Filipinos (Figure 2). While my dad would be mingling in Tagalog or Bicol with his Filipino friends and family, the rest of my family and I would be sitting at a separate table only chatting amongst ourselves. I would look around and see everyone else wearing barongs and filipinianas while my mom and I were wearing typically Western dresses instead. We were clearly separated from the rest of the group—ostracized for their perception that we lacked Filipino culture. Eventually, my mom stopped wanting to attend these events, so we would stay home and have even less of a chance at integrating into a Filipino community.

I also was directly confronted with my supposed lack of belonging when I gave a presentation on Filipino culture at my school's multicultural club. I made a joke about how I hoped no one would question my authority to speak on Filipino culture—and at that exact moment my Filipino friend chimed in and did exactly that. She laughed while saying that was more than likely to happen, because I "don't really know Filipino culture". It erupted into an argument, as I finally knew to stand up for myself after going through these situations countless times. Not only did it feel nonsensical to be called uncultured because I am not 100% Filipino, but it hurt to be confronted with all the ways I strayed from my own identity in her

eyes.

What was I expected to do to be considered Filipino? I grew up eating Filipino food multiple times a week. I've attended a debut (18th birthday celebration). I hear Bicol at home every day. I had gone to the Philippines as often as our family bank account allowed. I even met Sarah Geronimo. While I was aware that the Filipino community around me was small (due to my father and his brother being the only two of 11 siblings who immigrated to the United States), I still felt that I had solid grounding to claim my Filipinohood. Conversations like these triggered my emotions—and I could never comprehend my feelings or their causes. The parts of Filipino identity that I was 'lacking' were out of my control, and it seemed impossible to make the 'real' Filipinos accept me even when doing everything I could to fit in.

All of this goes to show that though I may have felt a part of certain communities, I have accumulated various experiences throughout my life that deny my perceived belonging to these groups. I was not considered White enough to be White, nor Asian enough to be Asian, leaving me racially homeless and confused since childhood. As to be expected, I have internalized the constant rejection. If all the people around me were telling me I did not fit in or I was misinterpreting my identity, I thought there must be some weight to what they were saying — maybe I was the problem.

Internalization: Overcompensating to Reach 'Whole'hood

At many points in my life—and still to this day—I have internalized the comments about my identity and begun to question my own belonging. Questions of my identity and membership have habited my consciousness: Am I always just pretending? Can I really be Filipino if I don't understand Tagalog? Am I overcompensating and acting more Asian than I really am? Absorbing the comments around me about my identity makes me cripplingly self-aware, constantly wondering if my racial positioning is accurate. Therefore, I have felt that part of the mixed experience involves racial

performativity and overcompensation to fit into an identity.

Racial performativity ran rampant in my teenage years. In middle school, when I would feel left out of groups of my Asian friends who were mostly Vietnamese, I downloaded Duolingo. I learned how to say a few phrases in Vietnamese so I could fit in and impress my friends, and so maybe they would view me as more Asian (even though I have no Vietnamese cultural heritage). I had always been interested in culture and participating in cultural activities and felt like I could refer to the Philippines as my home culture in situations such as my high school's multicultural club events. Upon arriving at the multicultural club meetings and seeing the presentations and performances conducted by other students, I was quickly confronted with the reality that they would not consider me culturally Filipino with my present knowledge of Filipino culture. To remedy this and prove to others (and myself) that I had the authority to speak on Filipino culture, I started actively immersing myself as much as I could. I started baking Filipino pastries, learning Filipino geography, and teaching myself Bicol through listening *extra hard* whenever my dad would be on his daily phone call with his brother. Evidently, I was pretending to be someone I was not — these cultural quirks did not come naturally to me. The mixed experience entails feeling so lonely and denied that one is driven to overcompensate their ethnic identity to escape 'impostor' status (Tate 2005). After all, all I ever wanted to do was fit in.

The comments and perceptions of those around me penetrated my being, causing me to question my own claims to the identities I had every right to belong to. At times I have felt there were valid reasons for my own ostracization: maybe they were right, and I was not actually Filipino or Asian. I believed that my 'halfness' made it so I could never be whole, and who would accept just a half? This self-doubt has provided me with a constant feeling of being an impostor, never truly feeling safe or comfortable in my racial surroundings. I can feel unjustified in deeming myself Filipino, knowing that my Filipinoness can be rooted in my active searches for connection to my heritage rather than my natural accumulation

of cultural experiences. Knowing that the perceptions of others are internalized has been a major step in understanding another aspect of being mixed race: the contextuality of these perceptions and internalizations.

‘Half’hood Across Contexts: Changing Situational Status

Despite having gone through a deeply reflective process of understanding who I am, a concrete answer of the mixed identity proves impossible to discover. Through my toughest efforts to be granted membership into Asian communities, I have realized that full membership will never be a reality for mixed-race individuals, as context, subjective perceptions, and self-image will always impact one’s categorization. While I may have been submitting to the view of my Asian American friends for acceptance into their communities, being accepted would have meant nothing after moving to Europe, where perceptions of me differ entirely. Furthermore, the mixed experience is not standardized, and every mixed individual will picture their identity differently. With this, I have realized that the mixed experience is a vastly complex one relying on context and situation. In my experiences living across two continents, my identity has been contextually interpreted, changing my life as I step across borders.

Contextually Valid

All mixed people can experience their identity differently from one another — but also internally differently across contexts. For me, I view myself as less or more Asian depending on my present country of residence. Since moving to the Netherlands and traveling around Europe, I have felt more Asian or monoracial than ever. My racial otherness sticks out in the pool of homogenous White Europeans, shaping everyday attitudes towards me. Speaking from personal experience, I have also experienced more racism and discriminatory treatment living in the Netherlands. Whether it be microaggressions from professors asking where I am *really* from or being randomly stopped and checked time after time at airport security, it has felt like I have constantly been treated as lesser because of my social identity as a POC. I have felt the glances towards me from others in class as soon as racism or POC issues come up,

and unintentionally taken on the role ascribed to me as the token POC. Evidently, when I live in Europe, I feel more Asian than ever, because of how obviously distinct my otherness is to the people around me.

My move to the Netherlands and experiences traveling in Europe have also led me to feel more invalidated and outcast than ever, as the culture of homogeneity and denial of race have revealed themselves to me over time. The lack of diversity where I reside (and within my university) has made me stick out to others; I feel recognizable because of my identity as the Asian girl with red hair. While at first, I saw this as a mere culture shock I needed to adjust to, I have since realized that a lack of diversity has changed how others perceive POC and thus treat non-White individuals. I had always felt extremely uncomfortable with the lack of diversity in my surroundings; I could not pinpoint why, but I always felt like I did not belong. Exemplifying the lack of exposure to POC, one of my closest friends here, a Spanish girl from Madrid, even told me that I was her “first friend that isn’t White.” Even someone who was taking the same courses as me in diversity or identity studies, someone from the capital (and largest) city of Spain, had not been exposed to enough diversity to have any friends of color until she was 18. Lack of diversity, lack of knowledge about the experiences of others, means an immense amount of misunderstanding and learning, making my existence a ‘new experience’ to those around me.

As a 17-year-old, I had also come to terms with a facet of my identity I had never seriously considered before: my Americanness. People began to categorize me as American for the first time in my life, and I started to notice all the ways in which I related to my nationality. However, with such a focus on nationality, it felt like my ethnic identity was being disregarded. As I shared these thoughts with my friends, I was confronted with the concept that ‘race isn’t important’ to identity—an idea meant to be unifying but that felt more repressive than anything. The colorblindness and tendency to focus on nationality seemed to once again render me as only half of what I am, while ignoring the other parts of my identity.

With the apparent prominence of my American identity above my ethnic identity, White Europeans further excluded me from any racial group I would identify with. One of my closest friends jokingly texted me that I “rinse out my Filipino heritage just because [I] went to Jollibee once,” denying that I have any real claim to my Filipino identity. In another instance, I was laughed at for mentioning wanting to form an Asian student association at my school because “of course the American girl who never even lived in Asia wants to start an Asian club.” While feeling discriminated against with these comments that ignore who I am, I was simultaneously always told that I “don’t actually experience racism or discrimination” here by other white friends. Despite my race sticking out more than ever in Europe, I was being denied membership into the Asian community even by White European outsiders because I am American.

Conversely, when I go back home to Texas, I feel much whiter, prompting a focus on my multiracial identity. Surrounded by racial diversity, my Asianness is less apparent and pales in comparison to others’ ‘POC’ness. Going back to the United States and being rejected from Asian in-groups, I feel that I have less claim to being a POC. I am considered ‘too White’ to speak on POC issues with the vast diversity around me, and I no longer stick out for my ethnicity. I am merely one of many. Why would I stick out when 90% of those around me are also minorities? While fitting into the crowd can feel nice in terms of my racialized identity, I still suffer from a lack of recognition in that I do not fit in with Asian or Filipino communities, as previously discussed. Therefore, even when not being singled out for my race, I am left without a sense of belonging.

My own sense of self is extremely contextual, giving my mixedness a conditionality that is not present within other identities. A simple move across borders means my identity (and, thus, how I am treated) is completely different. In some situations, I am considered a token POC, while in others, I am almost disregarded as one.

Situationally Valid

Even within the same context, the mixed experience can differ from person to person based on their feelings and situation. This

crystallized through recent conversations with my brothers, showing that even three people with the same genes had opposing conceptualizations of their identities. My oldest brother, Evan, revealed that he feels little to no connection with his Filipino identity, but rather has a more racialized identity experience than anything. Conversely, my other brother, Andrew, identifies with being Filipino more than anything, having the sense of a very strong tie to one part of his ethnicity. Within the conversation, they invalidated each other’s connections to their identities, Evan arguing that we did not grow up immersed in Filipino culture enough to fully claim it, and Andrew clapping back that not identifying with ethnicity almost feels like a rejection of our culture.

Personally, I did not identify with either of my brothers’ perceptions of their identities. I found myself to be in the middle of the two — I feel a connection to my ethnicity, but not to the extent of having a Filipino flag in every social media description as Andrew once did. I agreed with Evan that it felt phony to claim such a strong sense of Filipino pride, but I simultaneously thought that it was unfair to categorize us as unable to identify with the Philippines. I once again began to doubt where I stood, not understanding if my identity is more of a racialized one or one rooted in my Filipino cultural heritage. However, a red thread throughout our conversation was that we had all felt rejection at one point or another, contemplated our identities, and felt that being mixed was an important aspect of our identity.

Evidently, being mixed means different things for every mixed person, and even within one person can mean alternative identities depending on context. Part of understanding the mixed experience is comprehending that one may be considered half by some, whole by others, and the opposite may apply across alternative cultural contexts. It seems that no one can conclude ‘what mixed people are,’ as socially constructed racial boundaries permeate identity perceptions even among family members.

Conclusion

This research set out to understand the quirks and struggles of the mixed-race experience

through reviewing prior literature and analyzing my own experiences. Ethnicity and identity are immensely important to how we position ourselves in the world—and understanding such identity does not come as easily for mixed-race individuals. Involving struggles with racial ambiguity, rejection into racial communities, and racial performativity, the mixed experience is marked with a unique fight for belonging. Feelings of mixed-race groups are then tainted with invalidation, longing for community, and self-doubt. In reviewing such literature, my own experiences become relevant to grasping an in-depth account of what it is like to carry a mixed-race identity.

Following my reflections and realizations and relating them to the literature over mixed-race identities, I have come to feel attached to my identity as mixed. I have discovered the absurdities involved in forcing an identity into society's boxes, realizing how strict racial identification is and the negative impacts this has on myself and others. I do not want people to consider me just Asian or just white, just Filipino or just American—I want people to see me for who I am, which is a combination of all of the above. My truth is that I am mixed. I am Filipino, I am Asian, and I have every right to claim these identities. I am also American and white and equally have claims to this part of my being. To deny my mixedness is to reduce me to a social category—forcing me on a side of a line I will inevitably bleed over.

Having multiple ethnicities and races is something that has shaped all my day-to-day experiences, providing me with all my life views. For me, understanding my identity means understanding the rejection, discrimination, invalidation, and variation that may come with being mixed-race. Additionally, this understanding means having found a community in the shared identity of being mixed. Though I may not be admitted into Asian or White communities, I have found a home in mixed-race spaces. The few mixed-race friends I have—from home and university—have been able to relate to my experiences in ways I had always craved from other in-groups. Reflecting on my identity has not only shown my struggles to be real, but also provided me comfort in who I am. Identifying as mixed and reading literature over how there are shared struggles among

mixed-race individuals has provided me with the community I have craved all along. In a world of being invalidated, the mixed community (and mixed-race academia) has given me a sense of true belonging and validation. I understand myself now to be wholly mixed-race, wholly half-and-half, and wholly valid.

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