

COMMENTARY

Open Access



# “This is not how we talk about race anymore”: approaching mixed race in Australia

Farida Fozdar\*

\*Correspondence:  
Farida.fozdar@uwa.edu.au;  
faridafozdar@gmail.com  
Anthropology and Sociology,  
M257 The University  
of Western Australia, 35  
Stirling Hwy, Crawley, WA  
6009, Australia

## Abstract

Discussions about how to talk about race are ubiquitous among academics seeking to balance the recognition that race is a social construct with the very real effects of racial stratification. Naming race is seen as potentially reifying it, but ignoring it invisibilises its effects. Pathologising, celebratory and critical approaches to talking about mixed race can all be found in how mixedness is talked about in Australia (among the public and in scholarly work), and there are differences depending on whether mixedness is Indigenous or migrant. Using my experience of being challenged for speaking too positively about the experience of being mixed in Australia, and a Facebook discussion about Census categories, this paper explores the ways in which mixed race is talked about (and not talked about) in Australia. It argues that we can't move 'beyond race' before actually acknowledging it, something Australia has been very reticent to do, due to its race-based history of colonisation, immigration, and Indigenous child removals. Acknowledging race would enable diversity, and mixedness, to be counted, and therefore to 'count', in a context where multiculturalism provides a socio-political environment somewhat supportive of diversity, but where actual measurement is limited. It is argued that acknowledging race may be a necessary intermediate step on the road beyond race, and, for that matter, nation.

**Keywords:** Mixed race, Australia, Census, Cosmopolitan

I ended up walking out of my own session at the inaugural Journal of Intercultural Studies conference at City University of New York. It was 2015 and I had just presented some work from Australia reporting the experiences of mixed race migrant families and how they negotiate race and cultural difference in the socio-political context of a multicultural settler society. A mixed race male Professor of African American Studies publicly angrily berated me, saying: 'This is not how we talk about race any more'. My talk was based on a small qualitative sample (plus a little auto-ethnography) showing that mixed Asian-European migrant families in Western Australia appear to valorise mixedness, and that the offspring of such families engage with their mixedness in a playful way, recognising that it is often cause for envy among the white mainstream in the context of multicultural Australia (see Meyer & Fozdar, 2016). For these families, within their families, race was not generally salient, although culture sometimes was (Meyer & Fozdar, 2020). Interactionally outside the family there were occasional experiences of racism

(generally for the Asian migrant parent), but far more common were positive encounters that generated a sense of pride among the mixed offspring particularly, but also their parents. Their outlook was mostly cosmopolitan. I argued this is perhaps partly explainable because Australia's policies of multiculturalism over the last few decades have to some extent modified Australian identity and attitudes to diversity in a positive direction. I also recognised that this experience may be influenced by the particular racial mix being studied.

The scholar who was offended by this (anonymised here) has focused on the concept of mixed race in the UK and US, arguing that it is fundamentally linked to White supremacy and racial animosity in those countries. He had tracked the position of mixed black communities to show that even after generations, which actually entrench social immobility, the structural barriers to inclusion and recognition as members of the nation-state remain. I had offended him by providing evidence that the situation in Australia might be somewhat different, more positive and cosmopolitan in terms of everyday identities and experiences of migrants who are mixed, rather than the overt racialized stratification that this academic had observed in the US and UK.

Shocked by the vehemence of his reaction, after walking out I wandered around Times Square, wondering who is the 'we' who can speak about race and mixedness (both from the individual, national and global perspectives); when is the 'anymore' and at what point did ways of speaking change; and what was the 'this,' in terms of the vocabularies and themes permitted when talking about mixed race? Was I so very out of touch with what was happening in the world of mixed race scholarship? Or were we simply talking past each other? There is no denying the structural and interpersonal effects of racism, which I also have written about extensively, but there are differences in experiences depending on 'types' of mixedness, perspective and socio-politico-historical context (King-O'Riain et al, 2014). It is these questions I wish to explore in this paper, in the Australian context.

In work undertaken by myself and colleagues, as well as personal reflection, we have demonstrated how mixedness in Australia is complex and inconsistent—it is both valorised in terms of being seen to add a bit of spice to an otherwise boring White identity in the context of a multicultural settler nation somewhat embarrassed by its colonial past, in increasingly diverse physical representations of beauty, and in the penchant for proof of diverse origins through ancestry DNA testing; while it is also treated with suspicion and ambivalence for naming race, for not conforming with mono racial norms, and for reminding the population of histories of colonial dispossession (Abidin, 2016; Ford & Purdon, 2016; Fozdar, 2016, 2019; Fozdar & Perkins, 2014; Guy, 2018; Katz, 2012; Meyer & Fozdar, 2016, 2020; Tilbury, 2007). But this diversity and complexity of experience is not unusual. Scholars have been tracing it globally for some years now (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Caballero, 2012; Edwards et al., 2012; King-O'Riain et al, 2014; Parker & Song, 2001; Tizard & Phoenix, 2002).

This special issue invites engagement with the question of the value and challenges associated with moving theoretically 'beyond' the concept of 'race' in terms of possible futures with a majority population consisting of people of mixed origin, continuing inequalities based on colour lines, the potential for anti-racist political mobilization, and the possibilities of decoupling race from biology and culture. It asks whether it is becoming possible "even to stop thinking in racial categories altogether, yet without de-politicizing

Black's, or any subjected group's, history and experience." The editors have perfectly encapsulated some of the key themes reflected in the current state of thinking in this complex area. Here I wish to explore these themes through the lens of mixedness in the Australian context, and the question of how 'we' talk about race now. I argue that Australia needs first to recognise and speak about race before moving 'beyond' it.

### **Race counts: but who is 'we'?**

Mixed race studies are dominated by studies undertaken in the US and UK. Given the importance of social and cultural location and policy context, this is a problem. The history of slavery in the US, and in the UK its colonial legacy, generate particular structures, identities and experiences for those of mixed backgrounds, making generalisation elsewhere problematic. There are also differences in the ways sociological debates about race and mixed race have played out in these spaces (Parker & Song, 2001). While race is an important social issue, the terminology is relatively unproblematic in the US, whereas in Europe, the influence of neo-Marxist and critical thought means race is treated with suspicion as a potentially reifying construct. This argument, made two decades ago by Parker and Song, may be less salient now, given the strength of critical race theory globally. Certainly, over the last decade the publication of books such as *Global Mixed Race* (King-O'Riain et al, 2014), *International Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Mixedness and Mixing* (Edwards et al., 2012) and *Mixed Race Identities* (Aspinall & Song, 2013) have begun to shift this UK/US focus to other regions, and work in my own region is burgeoning (Fozdar & McGavin, 2016; Rocha & Fozdar, 2017). If race is a story about power that is written on the body (Spickard, 2015), these stories from elsewhere, with different power relations, historical and political trajectories, and types of bodies, are important. These voices from other parts of the world are being added to the 'we' of the academic north.

When thinking about the 'we' who is able to speak, considering who 'counts' as mixed is also important. Elsewhere I have written about my own experience as quite a white-looking mixed person with a strong identity as mixed (Tilbury, 2007), so will not repeat these reflections here, but instead use an example of how others in Australia engage with the question of counting mixedness.

In a Facebook discussion recently, on the eve of the 2021 Australian Census, friends criticised the ethnic identification options available. Many were themselves of mixed backgrounds, or married to partners of different racial backgrounds, making their children mixed, or multiply mixed. They railed against 'Australian' as a response option for the ancestry question, suggesting it implies a coloniser nationalist identity. But they were also somewhat dubious about my suggestion, added into the comments, that a race question was needed in the Census. This reflects the general distaste, indeed taboo, Australians feel about naming race (Guy, 2018). Those commenting on the post suggested alternatives they might use, such as 'world citizen', 'earthling', 'Chindian', 'Eurasian', using multiple categories (English Iraqi in one box, Indian European in another), and more. Comments included one (white male) individual who noted their own DNA test showed multiple ancestries spanning the globe (listed by nation) to show their own complexity.

Most participants noted they felt uncomfortable being forced to choose just two ancestries over others.

One white Australian new parent of a mixed child posted the following:

*"I know you are tagging me because of how this relates to [son] but I was like should I comment on this? Because really I'm just white af  
Love white people that, when talking about backgrounds, go "well I'm a quarter Welsh, a quarter english, and my dad grew up in Australia but he was actually born in New Zealand but his parents were Cornish and Australian, so I'm pretty mixed..."  
No mate. Ya just white (the above background is mine)"*

This young man's tongue-in-cheek analysis, which he gave me permission to reproduce, suggests a recognition of the limitations of mainstream Australians' engagements with the meaning of race, but also demonstrates that some are able to critique the assumptions on which such claims are made, and recognise the realities of race as both material and a social construct. This Welsh English Australian pokes fun at those who seek to represent themselves as diverse, something Spickard (2015: 291) has called 'me too ethnicity'. He refuses to 'speak', because he is white. And he names the un-nameable in Australia, whiteness.

Indeed, the Facebook discussion continued, in response, with challenges to the very idea of whiteness (in the form of 'my skin is not white, it's pinky beige, and I've lived overseas' type arguments). This refusal to name race is part of the problem, and the Australian Census categories encapsulate, and materially perpetuate, this. Census categories are important because they actively construct identity. Many other countries include race categories in their census; and the provision of mixed race categories in some censuses acknowledges mixedness as a legitimate identity (Rocha and Aspinal, 2020; Guy, 2018). This allows researchers such as Kaufmann (2018: 31), as noted in the introduction, to predict that the US will be 'majority minority' by 2040, and that within the next 100–150 years many regions of the world will be predominantly mixed race (Kaufmann, 2018; see also Alba, 2020). We have no such ability in Australia. The inability to identify the extent, composition and rate of growth of mixed populations in Australia means scholars, policy makers, and ethnic communities cannot accurately understand demographic trends, target and measure outcomes of multicultural service provision (Fozdar & Stevens, 2020; Stevens & Fozdar, 2021), or critically engage with the many dimensions of identity construction.

Guy (2018) argues this omission is evidence of the self-congratulatory 'colour-blind' approach Australia takes to diversity. In not 'seeing' race, Australia pretends that it prioritises universal humanity over racial distinction, and that racism is a thing of the past. This omission is not simply an oversight therefore, suggests Katz (2012), but a fundamental part of Australia's race relations milieu, a wilful unseeing.

Rather than colour-blind, Australia is race averse. As a colonial settler nation it carries some guilt at its dispossession and continuing oppression of the Indigenous peoples. The infamous 'White Australia Policy', introduced in 1901 as the first piece of legislation of the federated colonies, was a suite of legislative instruments designed to stop immigration by non-whites, and to remove those non-whites already in the country. This explicitly race-based policy, enacted through a dictation test, continued until the late 1960s.

Simultaneously, mixed Indigenous children were being removed from their families, to be raised in institutions. The Stolen Generations is the name given to those Aborigines and their descendants who, over generations, were removed, based on the logic that the coloniser should keep the nation 'pure' for British settlers and 'breed out' Aboriginality (see Guy, 2018; McGregor, 2002). Racial mixing was seen as an opportunity to gradually extinguish colour and culture, in these children. As well as leaving Australians averse to naming race, Guy (2018) argues this history has left a legacy of a 'preference for whiteness', even if that whiteness is minimal (as in the case of some mixed race people). These related histories are fundamental to how mixedness is experienced and engaged with currently.

But there is a fourth pillar to be considered along with the legacies of colonisation, the White Australia policy and the Stolen Generations, and that is the legacy of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism became policy in the early 1970s and has come to be the foundation of a distinctive Australian identity (Brett & Moran, 2011). However rather than celebrating racial diversity, the selective 'colour blindness' that invisibilises Australia's colonial history of dispossession, racist migration policy, and the removal of Indigenous mixed children, was also the basis of policies of multiculturalism, which privileged culture over race, and recognised cultural difference while ignoring the very real effects of racial disadvantage (Perkins, 2004). This became evident when former Prime Minister John Howard said he would prefer Australia had a *multiracial* policy rather than a *multicultural* one (Norrington, 2010). Howard's preference was for a nation made up of people of different colours sharing a single culture, with national identity primary.

In terms of policy and practice, multiculturalism was a way of invisibilising race. There remain limits to Australian multiculturalism, as Ghassan Hage (1998) noted in *White Nation*, with the power to 'tolerate' difference and govern inclusion into the national community still resting in the hands of the (unnamed) White majority. Rhetorically, though, Australia as 'the most successful multicultural country' is a strong theme in representations of the nation (Busbridge, 2020), and, I have argued, frames how mixedness is seen. While Hage's critique is valid, there are very high levels of support for multiculturalism in Australia (consistently at about 84% according to the Scanlon surveys overseen by Andrew Markus, see Scanlon Institute, 2020). Australians like to see themselves as multicultural and perceive that this is what is distinctive about them as Australians, as opposed to those from other countries (Brett & Moran, 2011). This fourth legacy creates a particular social and political environment that allows pride to be taken in mixedness, at least of a certain type.

The concern with naming race generated by colonisation, White Australia, the Stolen Generations, and perpetuated by multiculturalism policies, has meant that acknowledging racial difference, and being able to count race-based mixedness, remains limited. In practice, scholars attempting to identify levels of mixed race from the Australian Census data, to identify the mixed 'we', must creatively combine ancestry, language spoken at home, country of birth of parents and other measures. This shows mixedness on the rise (Fozdar, 2019; Fozdar & Stevens, 2020; Khoo, 2011). Higher proportions of young people identify as having mixed ancestries, and the actual proportions of those identifying as mixed are increasing overall. Thus, of the Australian population, 28% in 2006, 30% in 2011, and 34% in 2016 identified as having multiple ancestries. This is not mixed race

data however. Calculating the proportion of those with Australian/European and non-European ancestries, only 7% of the total population (just over a quarter of those with multiple ancestries), are mixed but this ethnic and racial diversity is growing (Fozdar, 2019; Fozdar & Stevens, 2020). Compared with the increase in multiple ancestries overall (which would include our Facebook contributor), however, we find a slower rate of increase for European/non-European mixes, suggesting race remains a barrier to intimate relations. While this calculation uses a proxy for race, it does suggest that a significant proportion of the population have racially and/or culturally mixed backgrounds. Thus, a demographic trend seen as “one of the most powerful indicators of integration of immigrants” and an “indicator of the progress of multiculturalism” (Khoo, 2011: 101–102), demonstrating acceptance of cultural difference, is occurring in Australia.

There is also a small, but growing, number of people who identify as of mixed Indigenous heritage; an even more difficult calculation given Indigenous people tend to identify as Indigenous rather than mixed (Gardiner & Bourke, 2000). In the 2016 Census, 40.2% of the 2.8% of respondents who listed Aboriginal ancestry reported being of mixed ancestry. Walker and Heard (2015) demonstrate high rates of out-partnering (80% or more) for Indigenous Australians. Such calculations are difficult and dangerous however, as Kowal warns (2016), and even these opportunities for self-classification may work to invisibilise populations and their oppressions. Since the 1960s Indigenous Australian activists have encouraged a pan-Indigenous identity, considering “all Indigenous people as a diverse but unified cultural, racial and political group”, regardless of mixedness or otherwise (Kowal, 2016: 20). Here, Aboriginality is seen as a combination of self-identification, descent and community acceptance, regardless of other racial ancestries. Kowal goes on to argue that for Indigenous people “their ‘mixedness’ is irrelevant to their indigeneity” (2016: 20). Thus calculating Indigenous mixedness should not minimise self-identified membership of the Aboriginal community, and ongoing oppressions and disadvantage must be acknowledged regardless of ‘proportion’ of ancestral background.

This has been of some controversy where Aborigines who are not easily recognisable as Aborigines have been challenged as inauthentic (Fozdar, 2019; Kowal, 2016), and condemned for opportunism, particularly in relation to use of affirmative action policies. The equivalent in the US is what Spickard (2015: 344) has called ‘passing for Black’. Bodies are recognised as raced by others, and thus “intercorporeality positions identity as an extra-individual accomplishment” (Klocker & Tindale, 2021: 212)—not being ‘seen’ as Aboriginal may invalidate one’s own sense of identity.

But some people of Indigenous background challenge this position. Yin Paradies (an academic who describes himself as an Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Darwinian [as in the city of Darwin] living in Melbourne) suggests that the strategic essentialism of pan-Aboriginality, while useful politically, has had some negative impacts, including leaving “an increasing number of Indigenous people vulnerable to accusations of inauthenticity” (Paradies, 2006: 355) due to a lack of cultural markers such as language, class, morality, cultural knowledge, and most importantly ‘Indigenous looks’. He refuses to privilege one aspect of his own identity over others, despite an imperative “that anomalous individuals choose to be either exclusively Indigenous or exclusively non-Indigenous” (Paradies, 2006: 357). Paradies’ preference is to create a hybrid space of multiplicity.



So the 'we' in Australia is messy and complex and unclear, and the fact is that the Census data can only tell us so much. This lack of Census categories affects identity, as noted, and may feed into the lived experience of inclusion or exclusion. Katz (2012) suggests the missing race category obscures racial identity, perpetuating the myth of White Australia, making it difficult to monitor discrimination and racism, and reducing the ability of non-white groups to develop their own identity, agency and politics of resistance (see also Luke & Luke, 1998). Guy argues leaving out the race question in the Census means mixed people "do not have a state-sanctioned space to identify" (Guy, 2018: 477), leaving them unable to "fully inhabit a mixed race identity" (Guy, 2018: 470). Whereas in the US there is an established mixed race community, with its own association, website and activities, and indeed a multiracial movement, in Australia there is no recognition of mixedness as an identity and no collective identity category available as the foundation for in-group solidarity. As Guy says "the racial ecology of Australia does not recognise ...mixedness as a whole identity" (2018: 477). Those of mixed race disrupt the assumed singularity of race, threatening dominant majority norms, hence the default to whiteness. This presumption of whiteness perpetuates the 'breeding out' logic of Australia's history—it 'de-racializes' those of mixed backgrounds.

It could be argued, however, that the lack of a singular community and 'whole' identity is not surprising given the range of mixed identities, and the differential experiences associated with being, say, African/White, versus Asian/White, versus African/Asian, and so on, and first versus second generation experiences. Add intra-Asian mixedness to the list and things get even more complicated in terms of identification and homogenizing (Abidin, 2016). Add Indigenous mixed and a whole new range of complications arise (Trigger & Martin, 2016). And does it even make sense to talk about a mixed community and identity, given the other cross cutting axes of nationality, language, culture, religion, class, gender, sexualities and so on? Paul Spickard (2015: 352) has been asking this question for over two decades now, contemplating "is there a groupness in mixedness"? He concludes that sharing common experiences as mixed does not provide the basis for enduring group identity.

### **When is the anymore and how do 'we' talk about mixed race now then?**

So how is race and mixed race talked about now, and how does the Australian situation compare to elsewhere? Ifekwunigwe (2004) identified three stages through which theorising mixed-race has occurred—the age of pathology, the age of celebration and the age of critique. Since the 'marginal man' thesis (Stonequist, 1937), which argued that mixed people are disturbed, excluded, and will never fit in to either identity until absorbed into the dominant group, theorising the position of mixed race people has moved on. In fact, Park's (1928) original conceptualisation of the marginal man, from which Stonequist elaborated, was actually not as negative and deterministic. As Daniel et al., (2014: 16) argue, Park recognised that marginality, while it may exclude mixed individuals from full participation as members of either group, does allow identification with more than one racial or cultural group, providing individuals with a "broader vision and wider range of sympathies. ...[their] alienation ...could be counterbalanced by the role such individuals might play in facilitating mutual understanding between groups and between individuals from different groups." (see also Newman, 2021).

Almost a hundred years on, and we are still debating whether the mixed person is an outsider or a bridge. A range of typologies have been developed, generally based on the US situation, to complexify this binary. Rockquemore and Brunnsma (2002), recognising individual and contextual differences in how those of mixed race experience their mixedness, developed a four-way typology of biracial black-white identity: singular (monoracial), border (biracial), protean (situational and shifting), and transcendent (nonracial). Such boxes are a helpful heuristic to understand the range of experiences and identities, but they are commonly 'ideal types' in Weberian terms, and people generally don't stay in the boxes we theorists provide. Spickard's (2015) outline of five models of theorising regarding racial hierarchy and multiracial social positioning is not particularly useful outside the Americas. To counter the valorisation or 'mixed race chic' perspective (Spencer, 2012), *Critical Mixed Race Studies* (CMRS) has become popular, using a critical lens that seeks to overcome the sentimentalism, superficiality and sensationalism of some analyses that focus on the potential bridging function (Daniel et al., 2014). Its focus is on critically examining systemic injustices associated with processes of racialization and social stratification, and to interrogate and challenge essentialism and racial hierarchy (Daniel et al, 2014: 8). This critical approach has dominated US mixed race studies in recent years, particularly Black/White mixedness, and tends to focus on exclusion through macro and micro aggressions.

In Australia, this critical approach is adopted by some. Ford and Purdon's (2016) stories of racism experienced as white mothers with brown daughters (see also Kwasi's story in Fozdar, 2016), which they understand using a Bourdieusian analysis, as the result of their perceived transgression from the orthodoxy of racial purity, is a case in point. They observe that "newer racial narratives that apparently embrace ethnic and racial diversity have not necessarily replaced older, more racist narratives. Rather, they have become layered and nuanced" (2016: 70). For them, Australian multiculturalism is a veneer, minimally and temporarily masking these narratives. Similarly Klocker and Tindale's (2021) participants experience invisibility at home, but hypervisibility in public, although this is not necessarily negative, and in terms of responses to mixed children these are often "well-intentioned and friendly" (2021: 216). Such experiences may make mixed families uncomfortable and hyper-vigilant in their anticipation of 'race encounters,' even if these are not negative. They sometimes are, however, with a range of stereotypes employed by the public in their interactions with mixed families. Reading the quotes from these families, it is clear that many encounters are 'raced' simply because the Australian public is not used to seeing mixed families.

Erica Chito Childs (2019), an American scholar using the critical mixed race approach, reports generally negative attitudes to mixing in her analysis of focus group discussions across Australia, with a dominant narrative of racial hierarchy where some groups more desirable than others. Some relationships are tolerated, some unspeakable. This hierarchy is framed, she argues, within a general discourse of Australia as a multicultural space embracing of diversity. For many of the white participants, mixedness was limited to interethnic/cross-national (and even interstate) white unions—such as a White Australian marrying an Irish person (echoing the Facebook parody quoted above). Childs suggests this "reflects an inability or unwillingness to even consider other mixes in intimate relations, instead offering a color-blind, yet still white, multicultural Australia"



(Childs, 2019: 429). Cultural assimilation was the required qualification for acceptance—participants in her study stated a nonwhite would be acceptable if they were ‘true blue’ (an Australian phrase used to describe a person who is genuine and expressing Australian values). For Aborigines and non-white participants, intermarriage was understood as tied to oppression (for the former), and rejected by the latter over concerns of how the non-white partner would be treated. This is odd, however, given the growing rates of mixed relations among each group. Childs argues ideologies of racial purity and miscegenation remain strong.

In other work, Guy (2018), using a sample of 6, argues those of mixed race experience invalidation of self-chosen identity, through the imposition of honorary whiteness, rooted in Australia’s history of conditional acceptance of otherness. The result is simplification of racial complexity by denying otherness. Official terminology reinforces the invisibility of race, she argues, and national identity norms limit the recognition of diversity beyond banal, mundane, non-threatening elements of cultural difference such as food, clothing and music. Guy reports her participants did not feel accepted as ‘Australian’, not quite fitting in in the way they desired.

In the above we see limitations on inclusion of racial others, with the majority White population dictating the terms. But there is another stream of research and analysis which, while seeking not to reinforce celebratory narratives, tells a more positive story. As noted, internationally a range of studies demonstrate that mixedness is no longer seen as an aberrant state. Newman (2021) recently offered evidence from the US that particularly for mixed people of migrant heritage, the linear expectation of assimilation that mixedness was supposed to signal is no longer relevant (if it ever was). Mixed race immigrant children blur, cross and disrupt racial boundaries, but assert strong multiracial identities to claim connection to multiple ethnic and racial groups. Far from being marginalized, their mixedness is a source of pride. She finds, echoing Park, that “Rather than eroding their claims to group membership, multiracial identity allowed participants to assert their membership in each category. ... multiracial identity assertion was a mechanism ... to claim connection and belonging to multiple ethnoracial groups rather than be rendered marginalized, distant, or partial with respect to their immigrant heritage(s)” (2021: 27). Alba (2020) finds similarly positive experiences of immigrant group integration in the mixed race experience, although experiences for Black/White mixes are more negative.

This hints that the apparently naïve expectation of the ‘great big melting pot’ turning out coffee-coloured cosmopolitan people comfortable in their own skin, may not be as naïve as it appears at first glance. A growing body of literature from a range of sites finds that being mixed is coming to be seen as an asset (Tizard & Phoenix, 2002), and a form of cultural capital (King-O’Riain et al., 2014). And this is so for Australia too. In Australia there is increasing representation of mixed race actors and models and mixed families in the media and advertising, suggesting not only a recognition of the growing proportions in the population, but also a valorisation of this identity, and perhaps more importantly, a dawning acceptance that Australian-ness does not necessarily have to look White. Some qualitative studies find Australian mixed-race families do not feel stigmatised or disadvantaged, and tend to see hybridity as a ‘third space’ (see Bhabha, 1996), experienced as positive and empowering (Luke & Luke, 1999; Meyer & Fozdar, 2016, 2020).

Unlike the 'Guessing Game' poem quoted by Spickard (2015: 180–182) where the 'what are you' question generates anger and unbelonging, many of mixed backgrounds in Australia enjoy being neither this nor that. They are citizens of everywhere rather than of nowhere—as some of the Facebook posts suggest. In the Australian context, because of Australia's visible diversity, they do not necessarily feel out of place, and indeed their identities are experienced as 'ordinary'. They use terms such as 'normal' and 'at ease', and see themselves as fitting 'in anywhere' (Meyer & Fozdar, 2016: 56–57). There is playfulness and pride in their mixedness, not exclusion and marginality. Their difference is celebrated, with a rejection of unitary racial and ethnic identities signalling neither exclusion nor unbelonging, and they themselves enjoy being recognised as different and engaging in the 'big reveal' to 'own' their complex identities (Abidin, 2016; Meyer & Fozdar, 2016). Even though this is sometimes a shallow engagement, and may feed into the mainstream's desire for a little difference to 'spice up' their 'boring' whiteness (Guy, 2018; Klocker & Tindale, 2021; Meyer & Fozdar, 2016), it does not homogenise as 'white' in the way Guy describes. A number of theses have made similar arguments in terms of representations of mixedness in Australian novels (Dickens, 2014) or art (Boltagici, 2004). They suggest that recognition of 'mixed race', particularly its ability to resist and disrupt concepts of race and colonial worldviews, has transformative potential, and can promote alternative ways of being in the world and engaging with others beyond racial categorising. Klocker and Stanes (2013), for example, found recent Australian films represent a hierarchy of inter-racial and intercultural unions. While some are tolerated, and a few are represented as dangerous, undesirable or invisible, some are celebrated as evidence of successful multiculturalism. Work by Tindale and colleagues (Tindale & Klocker, 2017; Tindale et al., 2014) demonstrates that mixed couples living in Australian capital cities defy ethnic spatial separation patterns (ghettoization), again demonstrating a positive bridging function. This is quite a different story from that told by Childs and Guy.

Ultimately then, even without a Census category from which to build a unique identity and potentially a community, mixedness is not necessarily seen as a sign of unbelonging, but indeed is used by those of mixed backgrounds as a means to connect across difference (Meyer & Fozdar, 2016; Paradies, 2006; Tilbury, 2007). Crystal Abidin has noted that in the Australian context, those of mixed race reference their heritage in a range of ways: "in celebration as 'special', 'unique', and a 'rarity'; in humour as a 'weird mix' and 'fun fact'; in pathology as 'not pure' and 'not normal'; and in dialectics as being 'complex' and 'complicated' (2016: 97). This range recognizes the complexity of the lived experience of mixedness, and covers the experiences of mixed Indigenous and migrant mixed racial settlers.

As touched on earlier, it has been suggested that these more positive experiences may have something to do with several decades of (more or less) explicit multicultural policies and rhetoric which, as noted, have generated a sense of national identity linked to multiculturalism (even if this is a somewhat shallow and superficial engagement). The positive reaction may owe something to bell hooks' observation about diversity more generally, "ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (hooks, 2006: 366). It may be that recognising mixedness makes diversity less dangerous, where mixed people are seen as exotic but still 'us', providing evidence of the potential for assimilation while livening up Whiteness, without

erasing it. This terminology shows up in how people talk about mixed-ness: 'We are a multi-racial nation and we should flaunt it' (Duncan-Owen (2002: 167), 'a mini-United Nations' (Meyer & Fozdar, 2016), 'Well we don't call it [mixedness] something because we are a multicultural society' (Childs, 2019: 428–9). This environment, that values multiculturalism, but also tends to expect migrant assimilation, may be more amenable to those who vary slightly from the (white) norm (see Hatoss, 2012; Guy, 2018), such as those of mixed-race, when compared with those more visibly and culturally different. But such a hypothesis requires empirical study. It is also possible that this celebration of partial difference reduces settler guilt and has a deflecting function, drawing attention away from the fact that non-White people were dispossessed through colonization, and continue to experience disadvantage and discrimination.

### Conclusion

So how do 'we' talk about race? Who is the 'we' who can speak about race and mixedness? Have ways of speaking about race and mixedness changed? Have populations become so mixed as to signal that we are moving 'beyond race', and to what extent does this enable an anti-racist political mobilization, or does race become depoliticised and irrelevant? Is the future one of boundary crossing, boundary blurring or boundary shifting? What does this mean for societal boundaries more broadly, delineations of power, and other social cleavages? And what does it all mean for the concept of the 'nation', when individuals of mixed backgrounds trace identities and connections to multiple nations while also being grounded in one? What is the collective and individual effect of the growth of mixed population in terms of imaginings of national identity? And to what extent are borders still policed in terms of who can claim race, mixedness and authenticity? How *do* we talk about race and mixed race now?

It is impossible to engage in depth with all these questions, but I do wish to make two points in conclusion. How we talk about race and mixed race will, and should, differ depending on socio-historico-political context. While there are points of similarity in the raced experience and identity globally, there are significant differences that must be acknowledged. In the case of Australia, it is vital to recognise that race has real effects, and that counting race and mixed race is valuable to better understand who counts and why. Australia's particular history of race relations and configuration of mixed race identities and experiences, means that rather than moving away from the language of race, there are growing calls to acknowledge race and mixed race, and its impacts on lived experiences and identities (Fozdar, 2019; Fozdar & Perkins, 2014; Guy, 2018; Katz, 2012). The differences that exist depending on whether people are of migrant versus Indigenous mixed backgrounds; and the different types of mixedness (e.g. Asians as acceptable 'others' in Australia (Lee & Bean, 2010) when compared to those of say Middle Eastern or black African backgrounds) are vital to understand.

The second point is about national identification. Rather than 'mixedness' being invisible in the racial and cultural landscape of Australia because national loyalty is paramount, as argued by Perkins (2004), national identity (as multicultural) appears to assist with recognition and inclusion (Meyer & Fozdar, 2016; Childs, 2018). It is worth asking how mixedness as an acceptable face of difference in multicultural Australia relates to mixed individuals' sense of identity, as distinct from their reception by the wider

population. Is Australian-ness important to them? And how does it relate to their own potential multiple transnational connections? There is some evidence of cosmopolitanism (openness to difference, world citizenship) in recent studies of Australian mixed race. It may be that mixed-race individuals are more likely to hold cosmopolitan identities oriented to global perspectives, partly because of their visible ambiguity, partly due to their ability to negotiate different cultural influences, and partly because of a range of international affiliations (Fozdar & Perkins, 2014; Meyer & Fozdar, 2016). Mixed-race Ghanaian/British philosopher Kwami Appiah has pointed to what he sees as the inevitability of his own cosmopolitan outlook, given his appearance (ABC, 2015). But it is not just about appearance. For the migrant mixed, it is the ongoing relational and historic connections with other places and people. This raises interesting questions about the value of the nation state in providing an overarching identity for those of mixed race to be included, and the breaking down of the value of the nation state as the primary site for belonging and inclusion. Mixedness is a constant visible reminder of global connection and the lack of exclusivity of intimate relationships. So although national identity appears to offer a context for positive experiences of mixedness, this is not the endpoint. The Facebook comment about being a world citizen may be prescient, in this respect. Being mixed-race of migrant background in Australia enhances Australia's claims to being a successful multicultural country, even as being mixed Indigenous is a reminder of its history of colonization. What is necessary is some means for talking about these experiences of race that acknowledges these histories, which may be an intermediate step on the road beyond race, and, for that matter, nation.

#### Acknowledgements

None.

#### Authors' contributions

I am the sole contributor.

#### Funding

There is no funding associated with this paper.

#### Availability of data and materials

ABS data is available from <https://www.abs.gov.au/>.

#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

There are no conflicts of interest.

Received: 6 October 2021 Accepted: 2 March 2022

Published online: 14 March 2022

#### References

- Abidin, C. (2016). 'Just Asian'? Inscripting east Asian 'mixed race' in Australia. In K. McGavin & F. Fozdar (Eds.), *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* (pp. 96–112). Routledge.
- Alba, R. (2020). *The great demographic illusion*. Princeton University Press.
- Aspinall, P., & Song, M. (2013). *Mixed race identities. Identity studies in the social sciences*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bolatagici, T. (2004). Claiming the (n) either/(n) or of 'third space':(Re) presenting hybrid identity and the embodiment of mixed race. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 25(1), 75–85.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2004). From bi-racial to tri-racial: Towards a new system of racial classification in the USA. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 27(6), 931–950.
- Brett, J., & Moran, A. (2011). Cosmopolitan nationalism: Ordinary people making sense of diversity. *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(1), 188–206.
- Brunsma, D. L., & Rockquemore, K. A. (2002). Socially embedded identities: Theories, typologies, and processes of racial identity among Black/White biracials. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 43(3), 335–356.

- Busbridge, R. (2020). A multicultural success story? Australian integration in comparative focus. *Journal of Sociology*, 56(2), 263–270.
- Caballero, C. (2012). Draughtboard Alley' to 'Brown Britain': the ordinariness of mixedness in British life. In R. Edwards, S. Ali, C. Caballero, & M. Song (Eds.), *International perspectives on racial and ethnic mixedness and mixing*. Routledge.
- Childs, E. C. (2019). Mixed matters in Australia. *Social Identities*, 25(3), 424–438.
- Daniel, G. R., Kina, L., Dariotis, W. M., & Fojas, C. (2014). Emerging paradigms in critical mixed race studies. *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, 1(1), 353.
- Dickens, L. (2014). *Intervening in the racial imaginary: 'mixed race' and resistance in contemporary Australian literature*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Sydney.
- Dunn, K. M., Forrest, J., Babacan, H., Paradies, Y., & Pedersen, A. (2011). *Challenging racism: The anti-racism research project: National level findings*. University of Western Sydney.
- Edwards, R., Ali, S., Caballero, C., & Song, M. (2012). *International perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Mixedness and Mixing*. Routledge.
- Ford, M., & Purdon, A. (2016). Now, look at my skin, it is black and it is white together. In *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* (pp. 79–95). Routledge.
- Fozdar, F., & Perkins, M. (2014). Antipodean mixed race. In *Global mixed race* (pp. 119–143). University Press.
- Fozdar, F., & Stevens, C. (2020). Measuring mixedness in Australia. In *The Palgrave international handbook of mixed racial and ethnic classification* (pp. 605–627). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fozdar, F. (2016). Race and ethnicity. In J. Arvanitakis (Ed.), *Sociologic: Analysing everyday life and culture* (pp. 159–178). Oxford University Press.
- Fozdar, F. (2019). Pride and prejudice: Opposing constructions of mixed race in Australia. *Social Identities*, 25(3), 408–423.
- Fozdar, F., & McGavin, K. (Eds.). (2016). *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands*. Abingdon.
- Guy, S. B. (2018). Exceptionalism with non-validation: The social inconsistencies of being mixed race in Australia. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 39(4), 466–480.
- Hage, G. (1998). *White nation: Fantasies of white supremacy in a multicultural nation*. Pluto Press.
- Hatoss, A. (2012). Where are you from? Identity construction and experiences of 'othering' in the narratives of Sudanese refugee-background Australians. *Discourse and Society*, 23(1), 47–68.
- Hooks, B. (2006). Eating the other: Desire and resistance. In M. Durham & D. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keywords* (pp. 366–380). Wiley.
- Ifekwunigwe, J. (2004). Introduction: Rethinking 'mixed race' studies. In J. Ifekwunigwe (Ed.), *'Mixed race' studies: A reader* (pp. 1–37). Routledge.
- Scanlon Institute. (2020). *Mapping social cohesion*. <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/report2020>.
- Katz, I. (2012). Mixed race across time and place: Contrasting Australia with the UK. In R. Edwards, M. Song, C. Caballero, & S. Ali (Eds.), *International perspectives on racial and ethnic mixedness and mixing* (pp. 23–35). Routledge.
- Kaufmann, E. (2018). *Whiteshift: Populism, immigration and the future of white majorities*. Penguin.
- Khoo, S. (2011). Inter-marriage, integration and multiculturalism: A demographic perspective. In M. Clyne & J. Jupp (Eds.), *Multiculturalism and integration: A harmonious relationship* (pp. 101–119). ANU Press.
- King-O'Riain, R., Small, S., Mahtani, M., Song, M., & Spickard, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Global mixed race*. NYU Press.
- Klocker, N., & Stanes, E. (2013). Reel-love across ethnic boundaries? The extent and significance of inter-ethnic intimacy in Australian cinema. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(12), 2035–2054.
- Klocker, N., & Tindale, A. (2021). Together and apart: Relational experiences of place, identity and belonging in the lives of mixed-ethnicity families. *Social and Cultural Geography*, 22(2), 206–230.
- Kowal, E. (2016). Descent, classification and indigeneity in Australia. In *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* (pp. 31–47). Routledge.
- Luke, C., & Luke, A. (1998). Interracial families: difference within difference. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 21(4), 728–754.
- Luke, C., & Luke, A. (1999). Theorizing interracial families and hybrid identity: An Australian perspective. *Educational Theory*, 49(2), 223–249.
- McGregor, R. (2002). 'Breed out the colour' or the importance of being white. *Australian Historical Studies*, 33(120), 286–302.
- Meyer, M., & Fozdar, F. (2016). 'A mini United Nations': Being mixed in multicultural Australia. In *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* (pp. 61–78). Routledge.
- Meyer, M., & Fozdar, F. (2020). Complex but ordinary: Intercultural negotiations among mixed families in Australia. *Journal of Family Studies*, 52, 1–23.
- Newman, A. M. (2021). Revisiting the marginal man: Bridging immigration scholarship and Mixed-Race studies. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 7(1), 26–40.
- Norrington, B. (2010). Free world must hold firm on cultural identity in battle against terrorism, John Howard Warns. *Australian*, September 29, 2010: 201.
- Owen, J. (2002). *Mixed matches: Interracial marriage in Australia*. University of New South Wales Press.
- Paradies, Y. (2006). Beyond black and white: Essentialism, hybridity and indigeneity. *Journal of Sociology*, 42(4), 355–367.
- Park, R. E. (1928). Human migration and the marginal man. *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6), 881–893.
- Parker, D., & Song, M. (Eds.). (2001). *Rethinking 'mixed race'*. Pluto Press.
- Rocha, Z. L., & Aspinall, P. J. (Eds.). (2020). *The Palgrave international handbook of mixed racial and ethnic classification*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rocha, Z., & Fozdar, F. (Eds.). (2017). *Mixed race in Asia*. Routledge Taylor and Francis.
- Rockquemore, K. A., & Brunsma, D. L. (2002). *Beyond black: Biracial identity in America*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Saini, A. (2019). *Superior: The return of race science*. Beacon Press.
- Spencer, R. (2012). Mixed-race chic. In E. Higginbotham & M. L. Anderson (Eds.), *Race and ethnicity in society: The changing landscape* (pp. 67–70). Wadsworth.

- Spickard, P. (2015). *Race in mind: Critical essays*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Stevens, C., & Fozdar, F. (2021). Ethnicity, race or nation? Census classifications as barriers to the measurement of mixedness in Australia. *Australian Population Studies*, 5(1), 49–55.
- Stonequist, E. V. (1937). *The marginal man: A study in personality and culture conflict*. Russell and Russell.
- Tilbury, F. (2007). Hyphenated realities: Growing up an Indian-American-Bruneian Baha'i in 'multicultural' Australia. In M. Perkins (Ed.), *Visibly different: Face, place and race in Australia* (pp. 145–162). Peter Lang.
- Tindale, A., & Klocker, N. (2017). Mapping the multiple geographies of mixed-ethnicity couples in Australia. *Australian Geographer*, 48(4), 473–495.
- Tindale, A., Klocker, N., & Gibson, C. (2014). Inter-ethnic partnerships: Remaking urban ethnic diversity. *Urban Policy and Research*, 32(4), 393–415.
- Tizard, B., & Phoenix, A. (2002). *Black, white or mixed race? Race and racism in the lives of young people of mixed parentage*. Routledge.
- Trigger, D., & Martin, R. (2016). Chinese history, indigenous identity and mixed ancestry in Australia's gulf country. In *Mixed race identities in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands* (pp. 12–20). Routledge.

### **Publisher's Note**

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

**Submit your manuscript to a SpringerOpen<sup>®</sup> journal and benefit from:**

- ▶ Convenient online submission
- ▶ Rigorous peer review
- ▶ Open access: articles freely available online
- ▶ High visibility within the field
- ▶ Retaining the copyright to your article

---

Submit your next manuscript at ▶ [springeropen.com](https://www.springeropen.com)

---