

‘What are you?’

For multiracial students, declaring an identity can be complicated **By Maya Rock '02**

In my first few weeks at Princeton, I became accustomed to fielding questions: What’s your background? Where are your parents from? And the strikingly existential: What are you?

What the questioners really meant was, what race was I? The question said a lot to me about how important race was in America, even if direct discussion of the topic seemed reserved for special holidays or incendiary news stories. My answer was, “I’m half black and half white” — a response that made me an anomaly. People were used to divvying one another up into five neat racial categories. After giving my response, I knew, white students would censor what they said about race in front of me, and black students would expect a certain solidarity. I often wished I did not respond at all; I didn’t want to be a spokeswoman for an experience many considered fascinating but which was, for me, completely normal.

In 2000, for the first time, the U.S. Census allowed respondents to check off multiple identities in the government population survey. Until then, people had to select from among five racial and ethnic groups: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, non-Hispanic black, or non-Hispanic white. The new form was an attempt to answer the concerns of multiracial people like me, who felt that they could not represent who they were when forced to choose a single identity. The census form now provides a total of 63 race options.

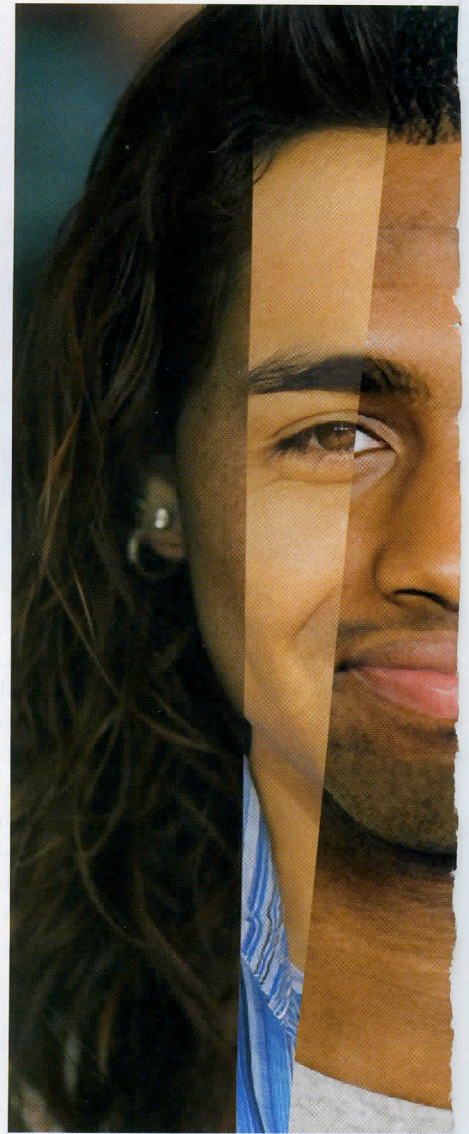
More than 6.8 million people, or 2 percent of the population, identified themselves as being of two or more races. (For people under 18, the figure was 4 percent.) “By deciding what groups that Americans should be categorized by, including whether or not to add a multiracial category, the U.S. Census creates a standard for public or social understanding about how race should be understood,” says Princeton sociology professor Edward Telles, who studies models of race and ethnicity. Some civil rights groups feared that the focus on multiracial identity would splinter members of racial minorities into subgroups, diverting attention

from important issues that are seen most easily in terms of black and white and possibly obscuring problems — in education and housing, for example — that should be addressed.

In recent years, Princeton also has recognized multiracial students. Until 2004, prospective students who checked more than one category on the application form were classified by the University according to their minority racial group — for example, a student who checked both black and white was considered by Princeton to be black. That changed with the admission of the Class of 2009: Since then, all incoming students who select more than one race are classified as “multiracial.” The classes of 2012 and 2013 each have 60 to 70 multiracial students — about 5.5 percent of each class.

“We want to honor how they see themselves,” says Dean of Admission Janet Rapelye, who notes that the change was made in response to increasing numbers of applicants selecting multiple races. “What we wanted to do was to tell students as they were applying that if you will tell us you are multiracial, we’re not going to say you have to choose.”

One sign of the growing awareness of multiracial identity is the Union of Multiracial and Multicultural Students





(UMMS), a student group founded in 2006 by Hannibal Person '08, who is half black and half white; and Sian O'Faolain '08, whose background is Irish, Hispanic, black, and Indian. O'faolain, who has studied issues related to multiracial people, explains that she felt a void on campus: "A lot of mixed students, myself included, shared a sentiment of not knowing which cultural/ethnic groups to join." Through the group, the two hoped to create a space for people from different racial backgrounds to discuss multiracial and cultural issues on campus and beyond. Today, UMMS has about 30 members and offers discussion groups, speaker events, and study breaks.

Lindsey Leake '10 is the group's current president. She identifies strongly as multiracial — for which she credits, in part, her black father (her mother is white).

"He'd always tell me [that] people will ask you to define yourself — never feel pressure to choose one. My parents taught me to embrace both identities ... I thought it made me special, like a gift." With that encouragement in mind, she joined UMMS. "I never felt excluded by whites or blacks," Leake says, "but I feel I'm the most understood by other biracials."

Leake recounts a group meeting in 2008 at which students shared personal stories; she described how she had been pulled over by a police officer because her car's tail light was out — and was chagrined to read in the report that the officer identified her as white. After Leake shared her story, she recalls, another student "said pretty much the exact same thing had once happened to her, but the police officer had given her a 'B,' for black. She was just as offended as I was!"

Jinju Pottenger '09, who is white and Korean, says the UMMS gave her a sense "that we were going to have to find a new vocabulary to talk about being mixed, since using the current vocabulary system was proving to be fairly awkward."

While socializing with other multiracial students offers a unique opportunity to talk about shared feelings and con-


cerns, it has its limits in providing a sense of community. Some students find greater satisfaction in ethnicity-based social groups. Pottenger, for instance, grew more connected with her Korean half at Princeton, citing a culture she shared with Korean-American students: "We eat the same foods, take off our shoes in the house." Han-wei Kantzer '11, German and Chinese, had a mixed circle of friends in high school; now he has more Asian friends than white friends.

Tiffania Willets '11's parents are white and Hispanic, from Puerto Rico. They made "a conscious choice" to emphasize her Spanish heritage, she says, and so she identifies herself as Hispanic, and notes the "cultural things, like food and focus on family" that draw Hispanics on campus together. But though she identifies herself as Hispanic, for others, it's not so clear: "White people see me as white," she says. "Hispanic people see me as Hispanic."

African-Americans, until relatively recently, had little opportunity to choose: People were identified as black because of a tradition known as the "one-drop rule," meaning that a person with any amount of African ancestry was considered black. (The rule, based on the discredited belief that each race had its own blood type, was codified into law in many states by the 1920s.) Even today, people acknowledge that they are influenced by others' perceptions. Vanessa Tyson '98 is biracial and was raised by a single white mother, but generally identifies herself as African-American. That's partly a reflection of how the world sees her: "I am biracial," says Tyson, an instructor of political science at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, "but I could not pass for white."

As Tyson and others have found, having the opportunity to check off multiple boxes may validate the multiracial experience, but those boxes don't translate into an automatic space for multiracial people. Determining identity is not only a matter of forms and surveys, but also a lived experience, starting with the face reflected in the mirror every day and growing through the responses and reactions of others.

That's something that President Obama surely understands. Has he changed the way the world views multiracial people? Kwame Anthony Appiah, a professor in Princeton's philosophy department and the Center for Human Values who has written widely on race and African-American intellectual history, thinks not. "The United States has lived for a very long time with the idea that you are either black or white or neither. If we hadn't, we would presumably respond to Barack Obama with the thought — which would be natural in Ghana, where I grew up — that he was, as we say in Ghanaian English, 'half-caste'" — biracial, says Appiah, who is biracial himself. Nonetheless, he says, many people view Obama as fully African-American, dismissing the side of his family that is white.

But that's changing, Appiah notes. "There are, of course, people, many of them younger, who do think it's obvious that the president is half black and half white. And I imagine that this may eventually come to be the standard view." 

Maya Rock '02 works in book publishing in New York.