



# MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

*A film by Brian Chinhema*

## PRESS KIT

An Abacus Production  
2335 NW Johnson  
Portland, OR 97210  
USA

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[abacusproduction@gmail.com](mailto:abacusproduction@gmail.com)

## **LOG LINE:**

Multiracial people are the fastest growing demographic in America, yet there is no official political recognition for mixed-race people. Multiracial Identity explores the social, political, and religious impact of the multiracial movement.

## **SYNOPSIS:**

Multiracial people are the fastest growing demographic in America, yet there is no official political recognition for mixed-race people. Multiracial Identity explores the social, political, and religious impact of the multiracial movement. Different racial and cultural groups see multiracialism differently. For some Whites multiracialism represents the pollution of the White race. For some Blacks it represents an attempt to escape Blackness. And for some Asians, Latinos, and Arabs, multiracialism can be seen as ill equipped to perpetuate cultural traditions and therefore represents the dilution of the culture.

## **BIO: Director**

Brian Chinhema was born in Harare, Zimbabwe. Following high school at an all boys boarding school, he took a carefree year to travel through Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand before going on to college. Upon his return home, he decided on the college he would attend, Missouri State University, by pointing at random to a point on the map of the U.S. Brian majored in finance hoping to be an investment banker, soon found he longed to do something more creative. One early morning, he woke up with an epiphany: he could take the safe route for the rest of his life or search for a career he would love. That same day, Brian set out for Miami, called his Realtor, put his house on the market, sold everything with the house except for his clothing and pictures, called his boss while on the road, and—while already eight hours away—quit his job. Though Brian came back a couple of weeks later to get some of his clothing and headed to California, figuring he'd be gone only a couple of weeks, it was another four years of adventure and travel before Brian finally made it back to pick up the rest of clothes from his friends basement.

After arriving in San Diego, California, Brian decided to live in his car and it was a year later before he got an apartment. Brian made friends with film and TV

actors, which spurred his interest in the industry. Though he contemplated going to film school, he decided to invest instead in producing and directing his own film project. After meeting a White identifying Caucasian-Asian biracial girl at a concert, Brian lit on the concept for “Multiracial Identity,” his passion-project. So he picked up and moved to the Northwest, where he figured there would be less distraction. While working a full-time day job, Brian set about completing the film.

## **Director’s Statement**

Some things never change. We all go through identity formation. We all emerge transformed. These are universal processes. But being in the U.S., I soon found out identity formation is even more complicated for multiracial individuals, especially in a society that is obsessed with race and with understanding one’s individual existence. I began to wonder what life would be like being multiracial in America today and being forced to deny one of your parents and to deny part of who you are. I wondered what it would be like to be viewed from some quarters as an abomination.

There are many films about multiracialism in America, most of which center around multiracial individuals’ common struggle to find themselves in a naturalized monoracial society. Few films take a broad historical and intellectual look at multiracialism. So that’s what I decided to do with this eye-opening film. Biology and religion are only two parts of this fascinating topic. Emotional, cultural, and social experiences also contribute to a multiracial person’s identity. I wanted to capture the personal world of multiracial individuals while asking the question: “What is the multiracial experience?”

If there are any rules about documentary filmmaking, I probably broke them all in the making of this film. I had one monoracial filmmaker—me—and one very ambitious idea: to explore multiracialism in America to improve people’s understanding of race and identity. Knowing that the idea of a starving artist/filmmaker did not appeal to me, I decided to get a full-time job to pay the bills, using my savings to make the film. The shooting schedule allowed me to keep my day job while still becoming very close to the subjects of the film. Leaving the confines of strictly observational cinema, I sought time to chat with, hang out with, or ask piercing questions of the family I had chosen to focus on in the film. Our conversations centered around racial identity, how and why they identify as they do. I was not interested in perpetuating the tragic mulatto trope. I wanted a family of individuals who were well adjusted and comfortable in their own skins. Each generation contains cultural references that mark its time

period. In making this film, I tried to illuminate what Generation MIX is trying to accomplish: recognition of multiracial people as a stand-alone racial group. By presenting both sides of the argument for a multiracial political category, I sought to demonstrate the political, social, and emotional struggles involved in the multiracial experience.

## **Production Notes**

### **THE CONCEPT**

Brian Chinhema lit on the concept for “Multiracial Identity” at a concert during a conversation with an Asian-Caucasian woman who identified as White. When he told her he thought she looked Asian, they began to discuss multiracialism in America, why she identified as White, and how race is a social construct. Though Brian had initially been considering another subject for his film, he knew at once he had found his passion-project with this new concept. His interest in the subject enabled him to complete the film while also working a full-time day job in a financial firm.

During his year of research prior to commencing the project, Brian became acutely aware of the political debate over whether or not there should be a “multiracial” category among the recognized races in the U.S. He watched as people aired their feelings about Barack Obama’s multiracialism in the media, noting the irony of a man accused of being “not Black enough” becoming the “first Black president.” It exemplified how different racial and cultural groups see multiracialism differently, and how those feelings play out in the political arena.

Brian was keen not to focus on just Black-White multiracialism or perpetuate the stereotype of multiracial people as “emotionally mixed-up” in his film. He instead sought to explore the subject of multiracialism through the context of the multiracial movement.

## THE LOCATION

When Brian first moved to Portland, OR, he didn't realize the extent to which Portland represented the essence of the invisible minority. In the article, "In a changing world, Portland remains overwhelmingly white," Betsy Hammond cites a 2007 American Community Survey in which Portland, OR is listed the fifth Whitest of the largest metro areas in the United States. Seventy-eight percent of the overall city (including the suburbs) is White while 74 percent of the inner city is White (the highest percentage for any inner city on the list). While Portlanders often pride themselves on their liberal values and politically correct interests, the city lacks the racial diversity of many urban centers. Brian hoped that by including footage of Portland in his film, it would help represent the sentiment of multiracial individuals who, like other invisible minorities, go unrecognized and unseen in their communities.

## WHAT IS RACE?

While many people in the U.S. are accustomed to five categories of racial designation—American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White—such categories were only recently assigned. In the early history of the Americas, certain European groups, including the Irish and Italians, were also considered "non-White."

If one were to attempt to examine race at the genetic level, as Dr. Susan Hayflick points out in the film, there are as much variations within a given race as there are across races. Genetically speaking, we are all so different that there is no way to tell our race from our genetic structure.

The very definition of "race" is ambiguous. Merriam-Webster defines race as "**2 a** : a family, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock **b** : a class or kind of people unified by shared interests, habits, or characteristics **3 a** : an actually or potentially interbreeding group within a species; *also* : a taxonomic category (as a subspecies) representing such a group **b** : breed **c** : a category of humankind that shares certain distinctive physical traits." Considering that race is a "taxonomic category," racial categories are largely defined by the people developing the taxonomy. Different countries have different racial categories, and how those categories are assigned largely reflects the sociopolitical climates of the country of origin.

When Brian first arrived in the U.S. from the United Kingdom (he was born in Harare, Zimbabwe), he thought the whole race debate was "silly." Why should it

be such a big deal in the first place? It was only after understanding the social and political meaning Americans attach to race that Brian began to comprehend its significance.

## **A HISTORY OF MULTIRACIALISM IN AMERICA**

For some Whites, multiracialism represents the pollution of the white race. For some Blacks, it represents an attempt to escape Blackness. And for some Asians, Latinos, and Arabs, multiracialism represents the dilution of their cultures. In the United States, the “melting pot” of the world, all of these views have been represented since prior to its birth as a nation. Multiracial relationships in the U.S. run back to the country’s very origins, when European settlers first began mingling with the native peoples. Multiracial relationships and the offspring produced within them have long been controversial topics.

The controversy of multiracialism in the U.S. has tended to focus on Black-White multiracial individuals especially. Because of the legacy of slavery in the American South, to be Black or part-Black designated a person to a significantly lower status than other races (though White was always designated the highest status). The U.S.’s previous one-drop rule and its once common anti-miscegenation laws exemplified the political efforts Whites made throughout U.S. history to protect their positions of power and maintain racial purity.

While children of multiracial relationships always faced a certain degree of stigma, if they could pass as White, they were more easily accepted. There were tests designed to weed Blacks out of high society and to determine which multiracial individuals could successfully “pass” as White. The Paper Bag Test, the Comb Test, and the Blue Vein Test all are examples. Some scholars have argued that, by using such tactics to admit certain multiracial individuals into high society, the upper echelons were creating a buffer class to help discourage Black uprising.

Though the multiracial Asian American demographic was not targeted by the earliest anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S., when the number of Asian immigrants began to swell in the mid- and late-18th century, the White population became more hostile and started to change the laws. The earliest versions focused on individuals of “Mongoloid” origin, but laws were later amended to include Filipinos (then classified of “Malay” origin) and Asian Indians (then self-classified as of “Aryan” origin).

It wasn’t until 1967 that anti-miscegenation laws were declared unconstitutional. Only in 1989 was the policy demanding children of mixed race be assigned the racial status of their non-White parent abolished. And only in

2000 were multiracial individuals permitted to check multiple boxes in the U.S. Census to indicate their mixed heritage.

## **THE MULTIRACIAL MOVEMENT**

There are many films about multiracialism in America, most of which center around multiracial individuals' common struggle to find themselves in a naturalized monoracial society. Few films take a broad historical and intellectual look at multiracialism. Seeing a parallel between the multiracial movement and the civil rights movement, Brian recognized the perfect frame for his film in the multiracial movement.

Individuals in the multiracial movement argue that multiracial individuals, by being denied a racial category, are being denied the right to have the same privileges as other minority groups. Even before the victory of the 1967 Loving vs. Virginia decision, in which anti-miscegenation laws were declared unconstitutional, the multiracial movement has been building steam, creating and developing local, state, and national organizations focused on achieving recognition of multiracial people as a stand-alone racial group. Many multiracial organizations seek to destabilize current conceptions of race and to shine light on what race can mean in the context of an individual's multidimensional identity. The movement's most recent victory includes the 2000 decision that people should be allowed to check multiple racial categories on the U.S. Census, though some in the multiracial movement would rather see a multiracial check-box available.

## **ARGUMENTS AGAINST A DEMOGRAPHIC MULTIRACIAL CATEGORY**

Critics of the multiracial category fall into two camps: those who simply dismiss the importance of the issue ("why can't you just pick one?") and those who deem a multiracial category as a threat to their minority status. When the multiracial category was on the table for discussion in 2000, representatives from several minority group organizations came in opposition. Their concern: that having a multiracial category would diminish their numbers and make tracking discrimination even more difficult than it currently is, particularly since the multiracial category is potentially so all-encompassing and so vague. Government officials also pointed to the difficulty of determining multiracial status for purposes of equal-opportunity employment and recruitment. Dissenters of the multiracial category also voice the concern that by introducing a multiracial category, it would be helping powerful White individuals dismantle

the already established racial minority movements.

## **THE FAMILY**

Brian met Aaron and Katie Reaney at a restaurant on his way home from a snowboarding trip. One of Brian's friends pointed Katie out because he was so taken by her, mentioning he thought she was Italian. Brian, thinking she might be multiracial, walked over to the table and introduced himself. He told them about his project and that he was just about to start filming. When he asked Katie about her heritage, she gracefully listed it. She confessed she wished there was a multiracial category. Brian hit it off with Aaron and Katie. They all shared an interest in snowboarding.

Though initially Brian didn't think he would use them in the film project, after several months of unsuccessful searching, Brian decided to contact the Reaneys again, and they met several more times. When Brian met the Reaneys' youngest son, he was blown away by the fact that they had chosen to identify their blond-haired, blue-eyed boy as African American. They also chose to identify their older son, who Brian thought looked either Middle Eastern or Southern European, as African American.

Throughout Brian's acquaintance with them, the Reaneys expressed their difficulty in placing their sons in a racial category, especially since the two boys are third-generation multiracial (Katie being second-generation multiracial). Brian knew their family and individual experiences would inform the film, helping to capture the multiracial experience.

## **THE HAPA EXPERIENCE**

"Hapa" is derived from the Hawaiian phrase, "hapa haole," which means of part-White ancestry and, more technically, of part-White and part-Hawaiian ancestry. Today, "Hapa" is used more loosely to refer to people of multiracial Asian descent. "Amerasian" is another classification of this demographic category.

C.N. Le in his article, "Multiracial/Hapa Asian Americans," on the Web site Asian Nation Online offers a summary of the 2000 U.S. Bureau of the Census' data regarding multiracial Asian Americans. There are about 1.8 million Americans who identify as multiracial Asian. Fifty-two percent of that population is half-White and half-Asian. C.N. Le points out that "if we include all multiracial Asian Americans as their own 'ethnic' group, they would be the fourth-largest



group, comprising 8 percent of the entire Asian American population ... In fact, demographers predict that by the year 2020, almost 20 percent of all Asian Americans will be multiracial and that figure will climb to 36 percent by the year 2050.” Despite these statistics, many people tend to ignore the multiracial Asian category when discussing multiracialism in America.

When Brian realized that Hapas are such a large demographic of the population, he decided to add information about the Hapa experience to his film project. Kimi Waite is a Hapa who is a fan of “Multiracial Identity” on Facebook. She communicated to Brian about how people mistake her for Hispanic or Arab and of her disappointment every time she has to correct someone. Though she talked about her anxiety when she feels excluded from any one racial category, she also expressed her belief that there was never a better time to be of multiracial heritage. He asked Kimi to speak about the Hapas experience in the film, knowing viewers would find her perspective illuminating.

## **THE SPEAKERS**

After his extensive research into the topic of multiracial identity, Brian knew that he wanted to present both sides of the argument surrounding a stand-alone multiracial category. In his research, he read Dr. Naomi Zack’s and Dr. Rainier Spencer’s books. He was interested in their opposing perspectives on the multiracial issue and felt that they articulated the two perspectives on the argument very well. Zack believes there should be a stand-alone multiracial category, while Spencer opposes one. Since both were passionate about the issue, they both gladly agreed to participate.

Dr. Naomi Zack has been involved extensively with the multiracial movement. She is herself a mixed race individual of Jewish, African American, and Native American descent. Currently a philosophy professor at the University of Oregon, she was trained as an analytic philosopher at Columbia University. In teaching, she likes to apply a method of traditional common-sense philosophy to a variety of subjects. In addition to her research concentrations on race, mixed race, 17th century philosophy, and feminism, she is interested in existentialism, contemporary ethics, philosophy of science, and current philosophy of mind. Her books include “Thinking About Race” and “Race and Mixed Race.”

Dr. Rainier Spencer is a professor in the department of anthropology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is the founder and director of the university’s Afro-American studies program. He wrote his dissertation for Emory University on theorizing multiracial identity politics in the United States

and remains strongly critical of the arguments used to support a stand-alone multiracial category. His books include “Challenging Multiracial Identity” and “Spurious Issues: Race and Multiracial Identity Politics in the United States.”

Brian also wanted to approach the issue of race from a genetic standpoint and not focus only on the sociopolitical debate, so he sought out leading expert and nationally recognized geneticist, Dr. Susan Hayflick. Oregon Health and Science University (OHSU) was helpful in facilitating his meeting and interview with her.

Dr. Susan Hayflick serves as the director of the OHSU Human Genetics Initiative and the program director for Human Genetics and Translational Technologies and Resources at the Oregon Clinical and Translational Research Institute. She is also the professor of molecular and medical genetics, pediatrics, and neurology at OHSU and is currently the chair in the department of molecular and medical genetics. Her special interests include biochemical genetics, adult onset genetic diseases, and neurogenetic disorders.

Brian became interested in having Dr. Aliya Saperstein contribute to the film after reading the article, “Racial identity: Not a black-and-white issue” in USA Today, for which she had been interviewed. When he found out Dr. Aaron Gullickson, her colleague, specializes in black and white interracial marriages, Brian asked he speak in the film as well.

Dr. Aliya Saperstein is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. She completed her Ph.D. in the Graduate Group in Sociology and Demography at the University of California, Berkeley. Prior to attending graduate school, she was a reporter for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and the Riverside Press-Enterprise, covering a range of topics from general news to college and professional sports. Her current research examines the relationships between social status and racial/ethnic classification and identification in the contemporary United States. Her dissertation was “(Re)Modeling Race: Incorporating Racial Theory into Survey Research on Inequality.”

Before becoming an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Oregon, Dr. Aaron Gullickson was an assistant professor at Columbia University from 2004–2007. His research focuses on the nexus of inequality, race, ethnicity, and kinship. He is currently engaged in a broad research project examining the development of the one-drop rule and the stratification of mixed-race individuals in the late nineteenth and early 20th century. His dissertation was “Amalgamations, New and Old: The Stratification of America’s Mixed Black/White Population.”

# THE FUTURE OF MULTIRACIALISM IN AMERICA

In 1992, for the first time in history, the number of biracial births was increasing at a faster rate than the number of monoracial births (U.S. Bureau of the Census). That same year, the U.S. Bureau of the Census projected that, by the year 2050, the typical U.S. citizen will be one of color. The U.S. Bureau of the Census currently predicts one in five Americans will be multiracial by 2050. The current demographic statistics on multiracial individuals already place them as a larger population than Native Americans and Pacific Islanders.

In “The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier,” Maria P.P. Root outlines the reasons given for this demographic trend: “... the higher birthrates from groups of color, and the increasing number of ethnic immigrants of color in the United States ... [as well as] a third factor, an increase in the number of self-identified multiracial people.”

So what will the impact of this growing population be? The very presence of so many individuals who do not effectively fit into one category may well lead us to question our concept of race and what it means to be multiracial. Multiracial individuals are a daily reminder to monoracial Americans that defining a person’s racial identity based on their physical characteristics often proves inaccurate. Just as Brian’s friend thought Katie Reaney was Italian only to find out otherwise, multiracial individuals force us to question our reasons for defining others—and ourselves—as we do.

Will the multiracial movement reach its goal of achieving a stand-alone racial category? Or will it perhaps help to shatter racial distinctions altogether? The outcome is yet to be seen, but the impact is and will continue to be felt.

## MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY

**EXACT RUNTIME:** 1 hr 21 mins

**COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION/FILMING:** USA

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