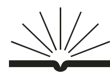
Minelle Mahtani

Mixed Race Amnesia

Resisting the Romanticization of Multiraciality



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Introduction
Disentangling Our Curious Affection with Multiraciality

> I was beginning to understand what it meant not to be purely black or white. There were the strangers who gawked at me and tried to unlock the mysteries of my lineage, who saw Ethiopia in my forehead, Polynesia in my hair, Nepal in my freckles.
>
> — MACLEAR 2012, 22

This book explores multiraciality in the contemporary postwar context in what has been optimistically imagined as a postcolonial, liberal, and multicultural Canada. It asks, *What work does the "mixed race" label do to support a romanticized notion of race?* I look at the experiences of those who are perceived to be from a plethora of places all over the globe, whose faces are routinely scrutinized for geographic clues, much like Toronto-based novelist Kyo Maclear's mixed race protagonist Marcel in *Stray Love* (2012). Engaging with interviews conducted with twenty-four self-identified women of mixed race in Toronto in the years 1996-98, I examine how they contemplated race by charting their personal stories. I make the case that Canada's romance with multiraciality governs both public perceptions and personal accounts of the mixed race experience in Canada. This curious affection requires some disentangling. I explain how Canadian mixed race identity is a product of colonial formations created and reflected through various cultural representations and facilitated through certain forms of cultural amnesia or strategic forgetting.

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In the past ten years, in particular, scholars from a variety of disciplinary homes have drawn from and contributed to what is now commonly referred to as critical mixed race theory (see, for example, Camper 1994; Ifekwunigwe 1999; Christian 2000; Hill 2001; Makalani 2001; Parker and Song 2001; Daniel 2002; Dalmage 2004; Ifekwunigwe 2004; Alcoff 2006; K.M. Williams 2006; DaCosta 2007; Squires 2007; Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Sexton 2008; McNeil 2010; Elam 2011; Spencer 2011; Bettez 2012; Ibrahim 2012; G. Carter 2013; and R. Joseph 2013). Through an analysis of qualitative, open-ended interviews, this book makes an effort to capture the experiences of individuals who see themselves as belonging to more than one racialized group.

Olumide (2002) points out that research on mixed race people has traditionally followed an extremist agenda, rarely defining them on their own terms. She claims that mixed race people have been either pathologized as having no place to call home, envisioned as torn and confused about their racial identity, or celebrated as holding the solution to the world's race problems. This text moves beyond these popular stereotypes of multiraciality by asking not only how they have limited a fuller understanding of the mixed race experience but also how the superficial celebration of multiraciality has worked to further oppress other racialized groups (including black and Indigenous populations). I make the case that we need to look at the cartographies of multiraciality – not at the objectifying "What are you?" question, which seems to distinguish so much of the mixed race experience, but at the "Where are you from?" question, which invites us to go beyond superficial analyses of the experience of the first generation by paying much closer attention to those complex diasporic life histories that inform the process of identifying as mixed race. The emphasis on experiencing multiple diasporic geographic locations, on the *where,* is a redirection from the "What are you?" question. I develop this idea more in Chapter 7, where I introduce and critique the idea of the *present tense* as a way of making sense of the epistemological framework that currently structures so much research in mixed race studies.

Obviously, the category of mixed race is more than a black and white issue. In the Canadian context, it is important to see beyond black and white in order to understand the issue through different kinds of racialized lenses, including Asian Pacific and Indigenous lenses as well as other multidimensional axes of identity. The literature on multiraciality in the academic context has focused mostly on the American experience of mixed race

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identity, which has been primarily seen as a black-white or Asian-white issue. This book makes the case that we must draw from broader global cartographies to inform a revitalized understanding of racial mixing.

This book has five goals in its attempt to situate the interview findings within a broader interdisciplinary realm. First, it provides a space for those who identify beyond the black-white binary (and the Asian-white binary) that so commonly characterizes definitions of mixed race identity in scholarship emerging from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom – those countries that are understood as multicultural liberal democracies in the global North. For most people in these locations, when "mixed race" is uttered, a partially white ancestry tends to be assumed. Why? Given that many women who identified as mixed race in this study did not claim any white heritage, there is clearly more to multiraciality than claiming one is half-white. I reveal the stories of women who did not claim any white heritage yet still identified as mixed race, particularly in Chapter 4, through an interrogation of critical whiteness studies. This book aims to challenge the predominant whiteness that characterizes studies of multiraciality on both the ontological and epistemological scales, paying attention to those who identified as black-white or Asian-white but also to those who did not claim any white descent. At the same time, however, I heed Andrea Smith's (2012) cautionary words about attempts to challenge the black-white binary. I do not want to "add and stir in" other members of communities of colour in this analysis, for such a project would only contribute to a superficial politics of multiculturalism, purporting that "if we just *include* more peoples, then our practice will be less racist" (ibid., 75, emphasis in original). As this book makes clear, such a project would not address crucial questions of settler colonialism or challenge the conditions of the creation of the settler state itself. Instead, I work in this book to remember that "the consequence of not developing a critical apparatus for intersecting all the logics of white supremacy, including settler colonialism, is that it prevents us from imagining an alternative to the racial state" (ibid.).

The field has become skewed toward a focus on people of partially white heritage. It is vital to recognize the role of the legacy of North American transnational slavery practices, where mixing between whites and blacks was punishable by death. In the late nineteenth century, mixed race people were tenaciously marked by the one-drop rule, where you were considered to be black if you had one drop of black blood. This is not to essentialize the wide range of responses that accompanied interracial intimacy; rather,

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it is to emphasize that anti-miscegenation laws in North America from the colonial era to the mid-1900s played a significant role in who was allowed to identify as white or black and subsequently as belonging to one, both, or neither of these groups. In the public and academic imagination, "mixed race" automatically implied mixing with white because of the logic of white supremacy. However, where do people who identify as mixed race yet do not see themselves as being partly white fit in to this picture, and under what circumstances do they claim this racial identification given the historical legacies of the "mixed race" label? *How might we reimagine the place of nonwhite mixed race subjects?*

Second, this book makes the claim that identifying as mixed race is not patently unique and different in and of itself. Nor does it represent a social or democratic good (see McNeil 2012), despite the ongoing social mania assuming that mixed race people portend an optimistic racial future, representing "fleshy confirmation that racial equality has arrived" (Elam 2011, 9). As Nyong'o (2009, 174-75) reminds us, "the impossibly burdened figure of the biracial child cannot conceivably do the work of utopia that we repeatedly impose upon her." Mixed race people do *not* possess special talents or abilities simply because they call themselves racially mixed. Instead, it asks why this stereotype often emerges in interviews with people who identify as mixed race.

Makalani (2001, 94), in his critique of mixed race identity, tells us that "it is doubtful that ... the [mixed race person] is naturally imbued with objectivity, rationality, and a keener intelligence that would allow him or her to assume the vanguard of ... race relations." We are not the purveyors of a new racial order based primarily on our mixed racial parentage, nor are we the people of the future. What we do share, if anything, is a similar set of racialized experiences that cannot be understood without unravelling the cultural capital that some, but not all, people who identify as mixed race share. In other words, I hope to divest mixed race subjects of their privileged status and reflexively analyze why they are seen as cultural commodities – emblems of a utopic future.

Third, this book emphasizes the crucial importance of remembering that race mixing is *not* new, in spite of relentless journalistic reports from the global North celebrating mixed race futures in modern liberal democracies (see Squires 2007). Mixing has occurred in the global South for generations, including Latin America (see Twine 2000a) and India (see Blunt 2003), yet mixing there is not seen as equally newsworthy. No one is racially

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pure, of course, but some people experience the privilege of being perceived as mixed more than others. As Elam (2011, 6) reminds us, the question should not be, "Why are there more mixed race people now?" – instead, we ought to ask, "Why do we see more people *as* mixed race now?" (emphasis in original).

Fourth, this book focuses on mapping forms of multiraciality in *Canada.* More precisely, it asks, *What work does Canada do – as a state, as a racial backdrop, as a formative geography – to impact definitions of mixed race in the Canadian context?* American (and to a lesser extent, British) literature dominates the field of critical mixed race studies, and this literature is not always easily transferable to the Canadian context, given our different racial pasts. As a result, I suggest that this incompatibility has led to mixed race in Canada being relatively understudied (although, of course, there are some notable exceptions: see Hill 2001; L. Taylor 2008; Lafond 2009; and McNeil 2010).

DaCosta (2007, 34) writes that multiraciality has "always been linked to the broader system of racial domination that demarcates white from black." I show in this book that multiraciality has been linked to the broader system of racial oppression and domination in Canada, which demarcates Indigeneous from non-Indigeneous as well. The motif of mixing plays a complicit role in ensuring ongoing white supremacist practices that allow for the systemic racism that structures the lives of both blacks and Indigenous peoples.

I argue that Canadian multiculturalism as a policy, practice, and ideology intertwines complicitly with liberal multiracialism. Mixed race agency offers a means through which liberal multiculturalism is enacted, in turn supporting an ongoing colonial project. For some Canadian mixed race women in this study, identifying as mixed allowed for a racial impotency, a concept I elaborate upon in Chapter 3, providing a space for some of them to be seen as racially unique without necessarily adopting an antiracist stance that would have bound them to a progressive politics. Some experienced the privilege of a particular form of exoticized difference, without recognizing or acknowledging the freight and legacy of historical racisms. Being perceived as racially ambiguous was opportune for some of these women, providing a way to opt out of race politics and instead access the white privilege that so often accompanies the experience of multiraciality – not only for those who see themselves as black-white or Asian-white but also particularly for those who do not claim partially white descent. I delve into

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this in more detail in Chapter 4, where I interrogate the ways that some mixed race women spoke about accessing white privilege.

Fifth, this book asks, *What is "critical" about critical mixed race studies?* It is important to distinguish here among three overlapping but separate arenas – first, studies that broadly consider mixed race identity; second, the newly emerging field that is called critical mixed race studies or critical mixed race theory; and finally, critical race theory – for these three things are definitely not the same. If we are committed to a politically progressive, truly critical mixed race studies, it would serve us well to consider how we might more carefully map out complex diasporic family histories in relation to imperial colonial legacies and critical race theory. More than thirty years ago, a rigorous school of thought emerged that has since explored the nexus of race, racism, and power, placing civil rights, ethnic studies discourses, and the law within a broader perspective under the rubric of critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Critical race theory interrogates the very foundations of the liberal order, including a careful examination of legal theory and reasoning, opening up a window to ignored and alternative realities of the experiences of people of colour and emphasizing the personal dimensions of the racial political project. Focusing on intersectionality, anti-essentialism, and tensions between assimilation and nationalism, critical race theory has shifted the contours of the study of race. However, it remains an open question how studies on multiraciality have been informed by critical race theory more broadly, and vice-versa. I make the suggestion throughout this book that a critical mixed race studies is possible only through a prolonged exchange both with critical race theory and with anticolonialism and anti-imperialism debates, which do, of course, inform critical race theory as well. But these intersections have not always been made plainly clear, and white privilege continues to shape studies of multiraciality more broadly (Sexton 2008; Elam 2011; Spencer 2011). *How do colonial formations inform mixed race social geographies in Canada, and how then do contemporary mixed race geographies re-inform colonial formations?* I emphasize that our analytical vocabulary for describing the experience of multiraciality is not yet up to the task of telling a more complex story about whiteness, race, diasporic mobility, and grids of racial intelligibility in a white-settler society within what is understood as a multicultural liberal democracy. This book tries to expand that vocabulary. Before exploring these themes in more detail, I ask what fuelled my own desire to study multiraciality.

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Intimate Social Geographies

> We were supposed to be the next generation, all newfangled and melting-potted, but instead we were like Russian nesting dolls. When you opened our parents' bodies you found a replica of their struggle, no matter how hard we tried to transcend it.
>
> – SENNA 2011, 180

We often write about what intimately touches us. I chose to write about mixed race because of the ways that it has influenced my own life. In sharing the following story about myself, I admit to some anxiety because I think this approach can teeter into a form of narcissism, an issue I explore in further depth in Chapter 2. Moreover, I make the case in this book that we must be wary of the political limitations of citing the lived, personal experience of individual mixed race people and using that as the sole basis for our theoretical discussions (see also Makalani 2001; and Ibrahim 2012). The field has developed, however, in part because scholars who identify as mixed race have provided the impetus. Personal experience has been a crucial component of critical mixed race studies, and although I explore how this approach has prevented a more robust analysis of race, I share my own story both to make transparent my initial desire to pursue this topic in a scholarly context and to emphasize how particular colonial histories have shaped my experience and interest in pursuing multiraciality as an academic investigation.

I see myself as mixed race. It wasn't always that way. I was born in Canada, but both of my parents were racialized immigrants to this country. My mother, Farideh Afshar, is Iranian and Muslim; my father, Kishin Mahtani, was from India and identified as Hindu. However, my mother spent some of her early childhood in India, and she speaks not only English and Farsi but also Urdu and a smattering of Bengali. I have spent a great deal of my life being asked to define myself because I am perceived as racially ambiguous – my racial background is hard to pin down, apparently. I have joked ironically for years that I have been called every single racial slur in the book, yet it is rare that someone actually gets it right.

I was in Hawaii several years ago and was strolling alone along the boardwalk, the dappled waters shimmering as the sun began its slow descent into the ocean. Suddenly, a woman ran up to me and tugged my t-shirt excitedly. "Excuse me," she stammered. "I know this must seem pretty forward, but

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do you mind me asking where you're from?" Before I could respond, she exclaimed, "No, no, let me guess! Moroccan, right? No, no, Algerian!" I experience variations on this episode about once a week, wherever I go, and despite that frequency, I still don't know how to respond to a question about my heritage without launching into a whole history of explanation. Am I Indian? Iranian? or Indian Iranian Canadian? Although I feel as Canadian as "snow and ice" most days (Philip 1992, 17), I am often not considered Canadian even though I was born in Canada, raised there, and returned there to live and teach. I never really know how to answer when people ask me the ambiguous question "Where are you from?" because I know they are not inquiring about my place of birth or my childhood geographies – they are asking me this question because they want to racially categorize me.

This story might resonate for some mixed race people because it is not uncommon for many of us to be continually queried about our racial identity. As I hinted at earlier, the question "What are you?" is one with which we are intimately acquainted, and conversations about how we answer this question are almost like a rite of initiation into what I ironically refer to as the "Mixed Race Anonymous" confessional club ("my name is X, and I'm mixed race"). This book attempts to unravel the complexities of the identification of mixed race beyond its use as a catchall phrase for people who experience a constant barrage of questions about their racial identity just because they look racially ambiguous. Certain people are seen as mixed race, whereas others are not. How that is determined depends on a variety of factors, including the currency of whiteness, an issue I discuss in more depth in Chapter 4.

Part of my personal as well as professional project has been not only to try to understand my own racialized experience but also to consider how we might more productively locate a study of multiraciality within a broader, colonial and imperialist global context that takes into account the diasporic colonial experiences of our families and their personal histories. Their complex transnational movements across countries and oceans require that we pay attention to the experiences of those whom Walcott (2008) deems double migrants – those who left so-called Commonwealth countries for Britain but ended up in Canada because of perceived improved opportunities and a vague sense that racism was milder there. As Walcott points out, despite many immigrants of colour desiring to emigrate from former (and continuing) British colonies, Canada's policy of requiring British citizenship was written to explicitly exclude those who were nonwhite.

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My parents were among those nonwhite immigrants who, by virtue of British passports, managed to travel from their respective places of birth to London and then finally North America, people whom the novelist Jhumpa Lahiri (1999, 197) refers to as moving to the third, and final, continent. Whereas my mother initially entered London with an Iranian passport, my father was from the Commonwealth and was automatically issued a British passport. My mother eventually came to Canada as a British national, having been granted this status because she was married to my father. They both rescinded their British citizenship once they came to Canada. They wanted their entire family to share the same citizenship, and for them, that was to be Canadian.

My father was originally from Hyderabad Sind, which was part of India but is now in Pakistan. Coming from a family with seven brothers and sisters, he worked painstakingly hard to scrounge together enough savings after graduating from St. Xavier's College in Mumbai in order to travel to London to study at St. Martin's College of Art and Design. His ultimate goal was to pursue a career in advertising. His mother was illiterate, yet she made sure all of her children obtained an undergraduate degree. In contrast, my mother had a more circuitous path to London, where she eventually met my father.

Unlike my father, whose upbringing was impoverished, my mother came from an upper-middle-class family in Iran, where her father was a well-respected engineer. He studied in England on a scholarship from the Iranian Oil Company, pursuing a graduate degree in engineering at Loughborough University.

My mother's paternal grandmother adored her. When my mother was barely a toddler, her grandmother was about to leave on an extended vacation to India and Burma (Myanmar) and pleaded with her son and daughter-in-law to allow my mother to accompany her. After much hesitation, they acquiesced to my grandmother's wishes, so my mother set sail for the shores of Kolkata, India. It still makes me wince to think about how hard it must have been for her to be away from her parents at such a tender age.

The plan was to return to Iran to reunite the family fairly quickly. However, weeks turned into months, and months turned into years. It became clear that fate had another plan for my mother. It was 1944 and the Second World War was ravaging the world. Travel across national borders soon became treacherous. There was no way my mother could return to her parents in Iran, nor could her parents leave Iran to reunite the family. After

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the war ended, my mother's parents rushed to Kolkata, and they ended up settling there for many years.

My mother's happiest childhood memories revolve around her early years in Kolkata. Her face becomes wistful as she recalls the intoxicating beauty of the blossoming bougainvillea that covered the elaborate front gate and the walls of her home on Park Street. She traipsed through New Market, giggling with her girlfriends, proudly sporting her school uniform. Almost ten years ago, I was invited to give a talk in India, and I persuaded my mother to travel with me to Kolkata. We visited her old haunts, and she showed off her old family home, tears welling up in her eyes, as she shared stories with me.

When her family returned to Iran years later, my maternal grandfather continued to work as an engineer in the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (yes, that was its name). My mother pursued her dream to become a paediatrician and started her medical degree in earnest in Lahore, Pakistan. She was about to embark upon her final year of medical school at the University of Brighton in England when her passport was stolen in Istanbul during the long road trip to the United Kingdom with her father. As a result, her studies were abruptly halted because she was stranded in Turkey, missing the first few months of classes without any chance of re-enrolment.

When she finally made it to England, she found herself in London without funding or any sense of what her next move would be. Ultimately, she would never complete her medical degree because of lack of financing. She eventually decided to take a course on the Montessori method of teaching, and she now runs her own successful Montessori school in Markham, Ontario, which is celebrating its thirtieth year of operation as I finish this book.

My mother met my dad at a party in London, England. Given her time in India, it was not surprising that they had some things in common despite their differences. They fell in love and eventually married, much to the chagrin of my mother's father. However, my grandfather was unable to pay much attention to his daughter's burgeoning new romance, as he was too busy grieving the loss of his wife, who had tragically died in a house fire. My grandmother apparently fell asleep on the sofa one afternoon, and her cigarette slipped from her fingers. If my mother's mother had been alive, I suspect news of my mother's marriage would have been met with outrage. My mother always told me that her mother would have, in her words,

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"skinned me alive" if she had known her daughter would marry a Hindu. Such is the premium that is placed on whiteness, and such is the legacy of hatred between Hindus and Muslims that continues to haunt our family.

My parents experienced both virulent and subtle forms of racism in London during the first few years of their marriage. Although they expressed a certain nostalgic fondness for Britain, no doubt influenced by their shared experience of the Commonwealth spectre in India, they would often speak in hushed tones to their Indian friends at the pub about their desire to abandon the colonial way of life. One evening, their best friends – coincidentally, another mixed Indian Iranian couple – excitedly told them they were going to try to immigrate to Canada. My parents knew nothing about the country, and their interest was piqued. They concocted a plan where all four would move to North America and start a new life together.

My mother started the long process of sending out resumes to Montessori schools in Toronto with the hope of finding work, and my dad applied for advertising jobs, praying he would get some lead. In 1968 they moved to Canada but without their friends who had made the suggestion in the first place. They had changed their minds at the last minute and decided to stay in London. They now have a daughter, who is also Indian and Iranian and about the same age as me, but she has grown up in Britain. She was raised among her extended Iranian family and speaks fluent Farsi, whereas I can barely mumble a few phrases, and when I do, they are marred by an awful accent. When we see each other, we chuckle about how different both our lives might have been if her parents had made the trip across the Atlantic with mine.

Over the years, my parents have carefully parcelled out which stories to share with me about their first few years in Toronto. I'm sure this was done to protect me from hearing about the racism they faced. They told me that when they first arrived, if they ever saw anyone who was Indian on the public transit, they would immediately smile, wave, and initiate a conversation because such a sighting was rare at the time. It was a way to make friends in a strange country where family was scarce. Now, as my mother likes to remind me, South Asians make up the majority of the population on the bus. If they did that today, they'd be so busy shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries that they'd never get off at their stop.

Not unlike other immigrants, they developed a network of South Asian friends whose homes we would visit on the weekends, friends we all referred

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to as uncles and aunties. We would pile into the car for the long trip out to Mississauga, moving from one person's house to another's, the fragrance of biryani in the air, the sound of jubilant laughter among the men, the clink of ice cubes in scotch glasses, the lilting Indian accents of the women, including my own Iranian mother's. The weekends were safe havens for my parents, a chance for them to engage with others who had fled the country of their birth. During the weeks, however, my parents participated in a wholly white world.

My parents tried to cocoon my brother and me from hearing how difficult those early years must have been for them. It was only recently on a trip to Australia that I learned from a friend exactly why my father abandoned advertising as a career and ended up employed as a civil servant in the Ministry of Education for the rest of his working days. I knew he had a passion for advertising and I had always wondered why he abandoned his beloved choice of profession. I found out why when I was on sabbatical hiking with two friends and fellow academics, Mary Zournazi and Paul Sheehan, through the Blue Mountains of Sydney. As we reached the crest of one of the mountains, the view of the Pacific Ocean stretched out in front of us. I lay on the grass, marvelling at the scene, and drank in the warmth of a beautiful Australian summer day. Paul had visited Toronto in 2000 and had stayed with my dad, taking him out for a drink (or three) in exchange for a place to sleep. It was at that moment in the Blue Mountains that Paul chose to tell me a story that my dad had shared with him over scotch. This was particularly poignant for me because my father had died of a sudden heart attack a few years earlier, and I missed him intensely. I longed to hear more stories about him.

Paul explained that my dad had confessed to him that he had experienced racism in the advertising world in Toronto back in the late 1960s. Apparently, his boss confided in him one day that it was unlikely that he would ever be promoted because of the shade of his skin. "I'm sorry Kish," he apologized. "You're simply too *Oriental* for us to make you an advertising director." I remember a chill going through me that day, even though the sun was beating down on us so brightly.

My brother and I struggled to make sense of the ostracism we both felt from my mother's side of the family. Many of our relatives were immigrating, as this was the late 1970s and trouble was brewing in Tehran. It is hard to describe the feeling of alienation we felt from our extended family of

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Iranian cousins and aunts and uncles. I felt haunted by a shadow of disdain whenever we visited their homes. This may have been because of our darker skin and because we were seen not just as half-Indian but also as half-Hindu, an emphasis that was understandable given the violent, bloodied histories between Muslims and Hindus, but as children, those histories were unknown to us. My dad certainly never felt accepted by my mother's Iranian side of the family. My brother and I acutely sensed this rejection and began to avoid family gatherings with my mom out of loyalty to our father, perhaps intuitively trying to provide him with some emotional support. We'd cozy up with him on the couch under a tattered, raspberry-coloured wool blanket and watch hours of tennis championships on television. But it wasn't just with my mother's family that we experienced isolation.

My mother and I would visit India every other year, as she felt very much at home in Mumbai and particularly Kolkata, given her experience growing up there, and missed India terribly. But she had no family there of her own, and we stayed with my dad's sisters whenever we went to Mumbai. Without my father present, however, his sisters belittled my mother, and I felt they laughed at her behind her back, even while she made unsuccessful and feeble attempts to be warm and generous with them. I could not make sense of these encounters, and it wasn't until I was older that I began to recognize that this ill treatment was due not only to my mother's fair skin but also to the class differential between her and these women.

My parents chose to raise us in the town of Thornhill, Ontario, a newish suburb just north of Toronto, which, at the time, was predominantly Jewish. My high school was populated with the kids of Jewish immigrants from places like Poland, South Africa, and Romania. Their parents, like my own, wanted to establish an upper-middle-class life for their kids. Most of my friends were Jewish (my family was one of the only non-Jewish families on our street), and they warmly welcomed my brother and me into their homes. As a result of countless lunches and dinners with them, I learned about aspects of Judaism in a casual setting. I began to yearn to go to Hebrew School and felt jealous when all of my friends were busy on Wednesday afternoons reciting and memorizing the Torah at synagogue. I dreamed about having my own Bat Mitzvah and inviting all of my friends to celebrate the day with me. I was invited to *Seders* by my friends and loved the sacred nature of the ceremonial practices of the Friday-night Shabbat dinner. I would beg my mom to buy me *gefilte* fish from the supermarket,

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and I would eat it furtively with a fork out of the glass jar by myself at home. My mother and I would still say our prayers together as the sun set every night, both of us hitting the mat and reciting Arabic verse, yet I longed to learn more about Jewish culture, to become part of that larger community of my teenaged friends, and to go to synagogue.

My own immersion in some aspects of Jewish culture shaped my own pronouncements and beliefs about multiraciality too. Mixed race scholarship has not yet unravelled the complexities of mixed religion and mixed race, which are definitely not the same even though they inform each other.

I tell these stories with trepidation. But I feel it is important to do so in order to indicate some of the complexities of my own complicit relationship to multiracialism, which is not only informed and influenced by my own colonialist and imperialist histories but is of course further embedded through complicated and unearthed religious histories that remain hidden to me. These personal family stories inform our experiences of multiraciality – but they go well beyond my parents' generation, extending back to my grandparents' generation and earlier. Studies of multiracialism have not been very strong on exploring the context-specific histories of the production of mixed race knowledges. They seem generally timeless and poorly historicized. I am curious about how my parents' wildly different and complicated voyages from colonial and imperialist lands influence and define my own understanding of multiraciality. *What is the shadow cast by imperial historical formations that inform intimate contemporary social geographies of mixed race?*

I have already said that mixing between racialized groups is not novel, despite the plethora of news media accounts that seem to herald the dawning of a new mixed race or postracial era. We are, of course, all mixed in some form or another, but certain combinations and computations of mixed race hold different value, with mixes of white descent firmly on top. For mixed race to be seen as an exciting and progressive racial category, a strategic forgetting has to take place – a forgetting of our parents' past and of our grandparents' past. Rowe (2008, xi) explains that this kind of forgetting

> comes from knowing more about what you are trying to become than who you are leaving behind. Its power is that it comes with a wage that compels you to devalue what's lost because you believe that you need to belong to a certain kind of future ... The privilege of belonging to this future comes at the price of betrayal to that past.

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Critical mixed race theory has provided a space for a certain sort of forgetting of complex diasporic histories through a focus on a particular kind of temporality. It allows for an unwriting of history, proffering a form of historical amnesia, particularly for those mixed race people who have experienced internalized racism. It can be seductive to see oneself as part of that bright, raceless new future and simply identify as multiracial. In my case, it was much easier for me to identify as mixed race than as Indian or Iranian. This identification befuddled people. At times, but not always, it provided safety from a barrage of diverse racial slurs, like "Chink," "Paki," or "terrorist." Through the proud declaration that I was mixed race, I would sometimes sidestep more direct questioning. But by doing so, I was participating in a form of racial epistemological violence that is enacted when we wilfully and not so wilfully discard the complex trajectories of our families' histories – stories that inform and influence who all of us are. *How can the "mixed race" label be used to avoid confronting either ourselves or the ongoing racialization of our bodies?* Ahmed (2012, 2) tells us that "forgetting has its uses." I see mixed race identity as creating a space for some multiracial women to enact a particular kind of strategic forgetting of complex colonial histories.

This study is informed by a variety of interdisciplinary sources, but it is also firmly ensconced within the field of social and cultural geography. There are particular reasons why I have chosen to explore mixed race identity within this discipline. Those of us who teach social and cultural geography often face puzzled looks when we announce what we do at dinner parties, where we are often greeted by the now-familiar refrain, "But that doesn't sound like geography as I remember it. For me, geography is about maps, soil erosion, and peninsulas." But, of course, geography is much more than just these things. Human geography offers a way for us to map and decipher the ways that we live out our lives in a complex, multilayered world – one that calls for a drastic revisioning of previous models of identity affiliation. Geographers in some ways are ideally situated to capture and chart the fluid and shifting nature of the forces shaping our daily lives. The idea that all social relations are spatial, occurring within particular physical contexts, is pretty much taken for granted among geographers (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007). Thus racism as a process and procedure works to map particular spatial patterns through which both spatial and racial domination are actively entrenched

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and maintained. Some critical geographers are committed to grasping the longstanding and lingering effects of these dominant spatial formations by identifying the ways that racism continues to infiltrate spaces and to shape our experiences in those spaces.

It sounds trite to say that race and geography have long been intertwined, but it is worthwhile repeating. The interplay of environment and geography was one of the first and most persistent theories advanced to explain racial difference. Although large North American cities have become increasingly racially diverse, supposed physiological differences that mark racial difference continue to speak to geographical origins, despite the distance from these places: "Where you are from, where your parents are from, where your ancestors are from" (Kawash 1997, 9). Kawash (ibid.) notes a telling detail that exemplifies her point: "the semantic shift from 'black' to 'African-American,' [which] evidence[s] a certain substitutability between the language of race and the language of geography." As Goldberg (1995, 185) notes, "Just as spatial distinctions like 'West' and 'East' are racialized in their conception and application, so racial categories have been variously spatialized more or less since their inception into continental divides, national localities, and geographic regions." In other words, geography has acted as a complicit agent in racial discourses: "The delimitations of racial difference have been understood to correspond to a global map" (Kawash 1997, 9). Through the particular illogic of cartography, separate human populations and attendant racial groups are fixed in particular geographic spaces. Kawash (ibid., 10) reminds us that "the history of positive racial science has been Modern Geography applied to human diversity; the races are the natural, physical formations that make up the social world." She insists that "race, like the places geography takes as its object, is reduced to physical objects and forms, and naturalized back to a first nature so as to become susceptible to prevailing scientific explanation in the form of orderly, reproducible description." She suggests that if we see it this way, "the human division of races is of the same order as the continental division of a mountain range or the expanse of [an] ocean ... simply a natural fact out there in the world, to be described in the most neutral and objective terms possible" (ibid.).

Any critical human geographer worth her salt will tell you that human geography is concerned with challenging this assumption. Our focus is on repudiating this tautology. This book pays particular attention to the personal and political geographies that some mixed race women create in relation to others' perceptions about their racialized bodies. Not only is there

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a historical specificity to perceptions of racial mixedness, but there is a definitive geographical specificity as well. Those geographical specificities have wildly varying political co-ordinates, as I make clear in Chapter 3.

At the same time, however, I do not cite specific locations in the city, like street corners or names of places, where mixed race women contest and play with systemic racial formations. I am far less interested in asking mixed race women about the specific material spots where they feel at home or in place because I think that geographies are unstable and shifting yet at the same time can be unyielding as well. I draw here from McKittrick (2006), who encourages us not only to conceptualize geography as a location in time and space, firmly rooted in the ground and in the soil, but also to consider what philosophical work social and cultural geography can do to inform critical understandings of race through the creation of new epistemological and ontological spaces. I choose to look at the spatial acts employed by some mixed race women and to ask whether these spatial acts *contest and challenge existing racial and colonial ontological and epistemological formations.* Here, I see spatial acts as "identified through expressions, resistances, and naturalizations" (ibid., xix). For me, the real power in drawing from social and cultural geography both as a discipline and as an analytical tool is that it can help us to understand the ways that race operates through these spatial acts. As Sexton (2008, 29) points out, race can also work as a medium, or connecting tissue: "Race is a production of meaning or a form of value and hence operates as communication, as an element of exchange." Racial communication takes place in a physical and geographical place and, in turn, alters space. *How does space constrict, refuse, conform to, allow, or create opportunities for different kinds of racial reconfigurements?* I investigate how different geographies on a variety of scales shaped the actual intensity and experience of race for the women in this study. The book tries to show that mixed race people have been made intelligible in ways that reinforce both racialized and gendered categories, their bodies routinely disciplined through ongoing processes of regulation to keep them securely *in place.*

As I have hinted here, I was driven to explore mixed race identity in an academic context because my own experience of racial identity throughout my life seemed to be radically different from that in the literature I had encountered. I have participated in countless conversations with other mixed race people over the years, and inevitably, we have remarked upon the paucity of literature available on how we negotiate and challenge interpretations of our racialized identities, especially in Canada (but see Camper 1994; Hill

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2001; and DeRango-Adem and Thompson 2010). Although we are witnessing a proliferation of new texts that explore the experiences of mixed race identity in the United States and the United Kingdom (Camper 1994; Ifekwunigwe 1999; Olumide 2002; Kwan and Speirs 2004; DaCosta 2007; Sexton 2008; McNeil 2010; Elam 2011; Spencer 2011; Bettez 2012; Ibrahim 2012; R. Joseph 2013), few studies have explained how individuals of mixed race identity negotiate their racial identities under various circumstances, over time, and at different times in their lives. This gap in the literature led me to consider a wide array of questions: How do we challenge static stereotypes of our identities as mixed race women? Why is there an assumption that there is a quintessential mixed race look? Why is it that some mixed race women are considered exotic beauties and seamless cultural navigators, ambassadors of the new global economy? Are there ways of understanding our identities beyond vacant euphoric celebrations of our mixed ancestry, where our bodies are seen as portending a colour-blind future?

I contend that the seeming invisibility of some insidious racist and sexist discourses in the Canadian context works to undermine a more careful understanding of the mixed race experience. As I make clear in this book, there are other ways to understand the mixed race experience outside of the prevailing paradigm of the mixed race individual as either confused and torn or able to solve the world's race problems by emblematically ushering in a postracial future (as though such a future could exist). The experience of mixed race is also not the same from place to place, of course. One cannot consider interviewing mixed race people without asking more about the ground upon which they live out their lives (see King-O'Riain et al. 2014) – for example, as Anglo-Indians (those of mixed Indian and British descent in India) or as Korean Americans (children born to women in Korea during the Korean War, some fathered by white servicemen and some by African American servicemen), not to mention as individuals born of the various forms of racial mixing in South America (see Twine 2000b).

I pursued this study of mixed race identity because so much of the literature on multiraciality has emerged from an American- and British-based context, with the modalities of race in both countries subsequently influencing epistemological turns in mixed race studies. I ask how we might understand the experience of mixed race identity in Canada – a modern, white-settler society imagined as a liberal, multicultural democracy. I am not alone in articulating the value of looking at the experience of those who identify as mixed race through a study of those located in a particular

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arena; indeed, Maria Root (1990), one of the key scholars contributing to mixed race theory, has proposed that among the factors and criteria affecting the experience of mixed race identity, environment must play a significant role. Keeping this in mind, I decided to limit my focus to Canada, particularly Toronto.

I conducted research in Canada's largest urban centre not just because it has the nation's largest foreign-born population but also because it was a city with which I was intimately familiar and where I had retained close personal and professional ties. The number of interracial relationships in Toronto is increasing, and interracial unions increased 35 percent between 1991 and 2001 (Mahoney and Alphonso 2005). Although we have no precise figures confirming the number of people who identify as mixed race in Canada, the Ethnic Diversity Survey conducted in 2001 shows that out of the 29,639,035 respondents, 11,331,490 indicated belonging to multiple *ethnicities,* but the census did not ask about *racial* origin (Statistics Canada 2003). I deliberately chose to carry out research in a city with a diverse ethnic population since it has been suggested that mixed race people growing up in places with more documented incidents of racism are less likely to have the freedom to choose their racial identity, a point I touch upon later in the book (Root 1990).

Most of these interviews were conducted in the mid- to late 1990s. This particular period and its corresponding politics, policies, and projects influenced and informed the gathering of interview material. Obviously, the contours of race have shifted since that time. Significant shifts to neoliberal forms of government and policies in Canada occurred during the 1990s. The government of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, which rose to power in the 1993 election, reduced the federal contributions to national and provincial social and welfare programs. In 1995, just before interviews began, Ontario's Progressive Conservative government (under Premier Mike Harris) was elected. The Harris Cabinet was explicitly and uncompromisingly neoliberal and "perhaps the most interventionist government this province/city has ever seen" (Keil 2002, 588). The Ontario Conservatives devalued many services to municipalities and initiated numerous restrictive laws that affected the everyday life of the general population in Ontario, especially Toronto. These shifts to neoliberalism at the various levels of government led to an increase in spatialized socio-economic polarization and inequities, including inequities in the distribution of resources and in access to opportunities, with racialized minorities and immigrants mostly

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affected. As I make clear in Chapter 3, this context shaped the responses I received in interviews.

Race 101

> To study race ... is to enter into a world of paradox.
>
> – OMI AND WINANT 1994, XI

> To say "race" seems to imply that "race" is real ... but "race" has been the history of an untruth ... the truth of racism as a lie: that is what we need to unpack before we successfully put behind us the ugly and brutal regime of race.
>
> – RADHAKRISHNAN 1996, 81

Somerset Maugham in *The Razor's Edge* (1944) warns the reader that he can very well skip a particular section of the chapter without losing the thread of the story; indeed, I would be surprised if the reader did not already understand many of the concepts I discuss here. But, like Maugham (ibid., 218), I concur that "except for this conversation, I should not perhaps have found it worthwhile to write this book," and I feel it is important to include this section, especially for those new to the study of race.

One of the most crucial issues in the field of critical mixed race studies, particularly in different national contexts, is who identifies as mixed race. What does this identification really mean? Of course, what actually constitutes race is a crucial question. But how one defines mixed race is also valuable to consider. Can you identify as mixed race if you are Indian and Iranian, like myself? Or are you mixed only if you identify as black-white or Asian-white – mixes that have governed both popular and intellectual understandings of the multiracial experience?

More than a decade ago, April Moreno and I wrote an article that asked whether we, as self-identified Indian Iranian and Mexican Chinese women, respectively, could consider ourselves to be mixed race subjects (Mahtani and Moreno 2001). What was our place in the discourse about multiraciality, and how did the existing epistemological framings in critical mixed race studies reveal a disturbing tendency to rebiologize race by focusing on who was and who wasn't allowed to be part of the mixed race movement? It is

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impossible not to consider these questions without a contemplation of the ontology of race and racism.

Dei (2007, 55) rightly points out that the "intellectual gymnastics" surrounding race have taken on a variety of forms, and in the past ten years, we have witnessed an explosion of work about the ontology of race and racism (see, for example, Saldanha 2006; and Sexton 2008). Although most scholars recognize the dangers in defining race, I think it is important before considering these questions to remind the reader of the arbitrary connection between anatomical features and political meaning, where certain physical differences (like skin colour and hair type) have been used to indicate crucial power differentials between individuals. This becomes particularly potent for people who identify as mixed race, as their very bodies can become a minefield of racial marking.

In most social-science literature, race has predominantly come to be viewed as a social construction based on an arbitrary affiliation of phenotypical characteristics with social and cultural inferiority and superiority, an issue I return to in Chapter 1. However, I must admit that I still encounter bewildered looks and blank stares when I state unequivocally to others, "Race is a social construction." Despite this reality, race remains systemic and a powerful mode of division. Although race always works with other identity markers like gender, ethnicity, class, and further forms of social stratification, race remains deceptively difficult to discuss. Barzun (1938, 94) provides a particularly productive and revealing definition of race-thinking: "a tangle of quarrels, a confusion of assertions, a knot of facts and fictions that revolt the intellect and daunt the courage of the most persistent. In its mazes, race-thinking is its own best refutation. If sense and logic can lead to truth, not a single system of race-classification can be true." Despite Barzun's claim that not a single system of race classification can be true, myths about race remain tenacious. Race remains ubiquitous, and there is a murky acceptance in popular discourse that the world is divided into specific races – which comprise easily identifiable and always stable categories. To understand the debates discussed in this book, it is crucial to remember that race is but a regulatory fiction, an imaginary construction with its origins in biological myths. As the critical mixed race scholar Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe (1999) reminds us, there remains a profound and painful relationship between perceived phenotypes (physical characteristics) and genotypes (biological and genetic characteristics). Phenotype remains the main determinant of race division and includes, but is certainly not limited

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to, skin colour, hair texture, and facial features. Scientists have agreed that race is a social construction rather than a biological fact. Genotype does not absolutely define one population and keep it distinct from another. Biologists argue that any distinction among human races is "but an appropriate shorthand for statistical tendencies in the distribution frequencies of some four percent of human genes over very large population samples" (Baumann 1996, 18). Thus the paradox of race is revealed: Race does not exist, yet it remains a salient feature in the public imagination. Society uses these false divisions to categorize individuals within social, political orders, which in turn determine our economic realities about power and class. These social constructions have become fully embedded in social relations, political interactions, and economic structures. Race is deployed as a shorthand for clues about a person's identity, as a central axis of social relations, and as a category of social organization central to structures, institutions, and social discourses. One's racial identity can determine "the allocation of resources, and frame political issues and conflicts" (Omi and Winant 1994, 61).

However, having emphasized the way that race is a social construction, I do not mean to imply that race is unreal. There are dangers in emphasizing the socially constructed nature of race. The seductive epistemological framework of race as a social construction emerged most consistently in geography in the 1990s, where some social and cultural geographers (among other social scientists) insisted on employing the idea that race is a social construction, without any biological adherent, as a theoretical scaffolding for their argument. The geographer Dan Swanton illustrates the limits of the social-constructionist argument by convincingly showing the failings of the tendency in geography to present race solely as a social construction. Drawing from Saldanha (2006), he insists that this framework limited the engagement of the social sciences with important questions of epistemology and interpretation (Swanton 2010). Although the social-constructionist framework was important because it illustrated the unstable nature of socially constructed racial categories, in an ironic way, it also worked to rebiologize and reduce race. A focus on social construction offered some geographers an easy way out of thinking more deeply about the work that race actually does. In my own teaching, I see the limitations of the social-constructionist argument. It is almost commonplace for us who teach about race to include a kind of "Race 101" in our classes, emphasizing to students that race is indeed an invention, a social construction. But as many of my students have asked,

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how does showing that race is culturally constructed do anything to ensure social and political change?

The social-constructionist argument has allowed for a particular kind of paralysis in conversations about race in geography and has worked toward a depoliticization of race. As Stoler (1997, 201) reminds us, the fact "that we who study the history of racism are so committed to documenting fluidity may have more to do with the sorts of political narratives of renouncement and thus of redeption we are intent to tell" – a point I return to in Chapter 2. Although race may not exist per se, and we can keep reminding students that it has no real biological referent, racism certainly does, and as Slocum (2008, 854) states, "fictionalizing race [can make] some of the most interesting aspects of race disappear." It is almost irrelevant whether race is a social construction when the lived reality of race is so abundantly apparent in the lives of mixed race people. I am sympathetic to Brunsma's (2006, 5) suggestion that "race is not something one is, but rather an elaborate, lived experience and cultural ritual of what one does." For me, the question "What is race?" is far less interesting than "*Where* is race?" This book tries to pay attention to how race emerges through moments and times in place, focusing on the geographical knowledges that some mixed race women impart.

In this book I ask, *What is the role of race in these women's day-to-day encounters with other bodies?* The politics of race is, in part, a competition over these socially constructed definitions, which in turn define individuals' place in the world. But this does not mean that there are no material consequences to these social constructions. As Saldanha (2006, 15, 18) puts it, "the structures of racism ... encompass much more than just mental categories ... Nobody 'has' a race, but bodies are racialized." This book is concerned with those who see themselves as being able to manoeuvre through racial categories, exploring the connections between these bodies while also citing the multiplicity of ways that these individuals see themselves as troubling race through particular actions and subjectivities. As experienced by the women in this study, the most salient points about race are that it shapes understandings of the boundaries between mixed race people and that it is always influenced by cultural identities in ways that are not easily unravelled.

Of course, the mere presence of individuals who define themselves as mixed race does not challenge racial categories. I am wary of the dangers of presenting mixed race people as "progressive trailblazers" (Elam 2011, 87),

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a point I return to in Chapter 3. Although some mixed race women feel they have the potential to become "race traitors" (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996) since they see themselves as defying simplistic racial classification, this stance does not mean that they conveniently escape the trappings of racism or that they automatically challenge racism simply by being. As I show in Chapter 1, specific historical genealogies employed to make sense of the mixed race experience repeatedly demonstrate the complex forms of violence enacted upon the mixed race body (Mawani 2009), but there are moments, too, when the mixed race body enacts violence. This book develops new ways of understanding the racialized and gendered embodiment of mixed race subjects by charting the acts of agency they employ to get on and get by in a highly charged, racialized world. Elam (2011, 52) reminds us of Du Bois's (1989) astute insight about the value of studying mixed race through a multidisciplinary approach, insisting that Du Bois "understood that considerations of mixed race were always grounded in an analysis of psychology, power, history, and economics." I take this point into consideration.

Terminology: Mixed Race, Mixing Races

Finally, one might well ask why I don't put the terms "mixed race" and "race" in scare quotes. It has become common practice in the social sciences to do so with the word "race" in order to indicate its arbitrary connection to anatomical features, and more often than not, the term "mixed race" is also put in scare quotes. However, I agree with feminist geographers Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake (1994, 231), who claim that "scare quoting gives [race] an un-natural quality, as though races could be de-constructed if only racism were sufficiently resisted." Like Montagu (1952, 284), I feel that "one cannot combat racism by enclosing the word ['race'] in quotes." Although the practice does emphasize a point – namely that whereas race is a social phenomenon, race as a biological category does not exist – I deliberately do not use scare quotes with the term "race" in order to remind the reader of the very material ways that ideas around race and accompanying racial violence continue to proliferate. I am concerned about studies that place the word "race" in scare quotes because doing so tends to allow for proliferation of the knowledge that race is a social construction without attending to its very real material consequences. Although it is indeed

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true that race is a social invention, I am wary of the space that such a claim creates by opening up an opportunity for "racists to reinstate biological justifications for white privilege" (Saldanha 2006, 10). Scare quotes "signal an awareness of the word's tainted history and scepticism" (ibid., 13). However, terms like "nation," "gender," and "sex" are also hotly contested, and we do not put them in scare quotes with regularity. I hope that this "Race 101" section has clarified how racial categories serve to create a social order that controls the flow of moral rights and obligations, as well as the materiality of privilege. As Maugham (1944, 219) would say, "so much for that."

Organization of the Book

The book is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 1, "Mixed Race Mythologies," attempts to critically examine the broad-ranging literature about the mixed race experience. It looks at the ways that an emerging new scholarship on multiraciality has not necessarily sparked a politicized conversation that would inform anticolonial scholarship. I argue that critical mixed race theory and its accompanying epistemological practices cannot be assumed to be politically progressive or necessarily committed to social-justice struggles. I suggest that a focus on what are seen as new forms of mixing, including the problematic appropriation of the term "New Métis" to describe multiracial identities of immigrant mixes, has strategically excluded the concerns of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and has refused to engage with scholarship on the black Canadian experience.

In Chapter 2, "Mixed Race Narcissism?" I explore in greater detail the contradictory nature of a mixed race population by introducing the participants in this study, as well as delving more deeply into my own complicit positioning as a mixed race woman conducting this research.

Chapter 3, "The Model Multiracial," begins the empirical analysis by introducing a brief history of the Canadian multicultural project. It attempts to contextualize the way that some mixed race people imagine themselves as intrinsically antiracist simply by identifying as mixed race. I make the case that some mixed race women demonstrate a particular kind of racial impotency that allows for a neutralized liberal stance and explain what role the mixed race figure played in racial formation in Toronto in the late 1990s.

In Chapter 4, "Beyond the Passing Narrative," I investigate the ways that participants positioned themselves in relation to white identity. I argue that

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many participants negotiated perceptions of themselves as both nonwhite and white, with subjectivity playing a crucial role in the ways that one's racialized location was allocated.

I propose the development of a new spatial metaphor in Chapter 5, "Mongrels, Interpreters, Ambassadors, and Bridges?" to examine the ways that participants contemplated the "mixed race" label to identify themselves. I also illustrate some of the more complicated affinities and alliances that participants forged with others in situations that were ridden with both racialized and gendered meanings.

Chapter 6, "Mixed Race Scanners," chronicles the ways that participants enacted complex racialized performances to disrupt constraining, oppressive, and dichotomous readings of their ethnic identity. I map out racialized performativity in the social landscape by exploring how participants often pretended to be of various ethnicities, thus demonstrating how race is a social invention.

In my concluding chapter, "Present Tense," I draw upon my empirical work to speculate about future routes in critical mixed race theory. In particular, I point out the limitations of this particular study and discuss the possibilities and pitfalls of the creation of an intellectual nexus that places at centre stage the ways that mixed race women speak about affinities, affiliations, connections, and coalitions without problematizing these stances. Finally, I explore what an anticolonial approach to the study of multiraciality would look like if we seriously contemplated producing analyses of mixed race that refused to privilege whiteness and colonialism.

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