

Sylvia Martinez and
Aaron C. Toland

MULTIRACIAL LATINX COLLEGE STUDENTS

Navigating Sense of Place in Monoracial Contexts

Latinx Studies

Collection Editor
MANUEL CALLAHAN

LIVED PLACES
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Abstract

While the multiracial population in the US is growing, racial/ethnic identities are still largely read and perceived using a monoracial lens. This monoracial lens creates challenges for multiracial individuals, such as feeling out of place in many social contexts. However, the feelings and experiences of multiracial Latinx students are largely understudied. This qualitative interview study centers the lived experiences of multiracial Latinx students by focusing on how they have made sense of their racial/ethnic identities in their home and K-16 school communities. Interviewees named various experiences ranging from support to overt racism in home and educational settings.

Key words

multiracial Latinx; Latinx ethnic identity; racial/ethnic identity; multiracial identity; Latinx education; sense of belonging; higher education

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Learning objectives

After reading this text the reader will be able to:

- explain the complexity for multiracial Latinx individuals navigating quantitative and/or survey instruments such as the Census.
- explain how multiracial Latinx students make sense of their identities over time and in specific contexts.
- explain how social contexts such as home and school communities largely function and are determined by a monoracial lens, creating social, cultural, and emotional challenges for multiracial Latinx youth.
- identify proactive approaches by multiracial Latinx students to craft a sense of belonging in monoracial home and school contexts.

1
Introduction

> "So, like this is something I've been thinking about a lot, just like where I fit in. For me, it's something that like, I'm a little bit of everything. But that also makes me feel like I don't belong in any racial group because I'm not any like, fully anything."
>
> ~ Alyssa (3rd year student, Mexican/Puerto Rican and Black)

> "I feel like what's normal is like just being like one thing. Like, so either you're White, you're Mexican, you're Black, you're Puerto Rican, just like being fully one thing."
>
> ~ Alyssa

During the 2024 presidential election campaign, former president (at the time) Trump infamously questioned Vice President Kamala Harris' racial/ethnic identity at the National Association of Black Journalists convention. Trump was quoted as saying, "She was always of Indian heritage, and she was only promoting Indian heritage. I didn't know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black. So I don't know, is she Indian or is she Black?" (Fowler, 2024). Donald Trump's remarks sparked much controversy among Democrats and other liberals at the

time but his gross misunderstanding of the possibility of a biracial or multiracial identity is all too common. Trump's perspective epitomizes the monoracial lens people use to understand racial/ethnic identities in the US which results in the most common racial microaggression experienced by multiracial individuals, monoracism.

Monoracism can be understood as an oppressive social system that targets multiracial individuals because they do not fit into monoracial categories (Harris, 2017a; Johnston-Guerrero, Tran, and Combs, 2020). As products of our environments, we have been socialized to understand race as comprising distinct categories such as White, Black or African-American, Asian, and Native American or American Indian. As a result, we largely operate using a monoracial lens when trying to identify a person's racial/ethnic identity. We try to place an individual in one of the four major racial categories with which we are most familiar. Clearly this monoracial lens creates challenges for the ways in which the multiracial population in the US experiences racial/ethnic identity. This book speaks to the challenges faced by a sub section of the multiracial Latinx population, an understudied population. In fact, the multiracial Latinx students highlighted in this book frequently spoke about being questioned about their racial/ethnic identities, resulting in feeling out of place in many social contexts. Alyssa's quotes above are emblematic of the lived experiences described by the multiracial Latinx students interviewed for this book. Students understand that "normal" racial identity operates as just "being one thing." And because they are not "just one thing," they feel as if they don't belong to any racial group because they are not "fully anything." By focusing on how

multiracial Latinx students understand their identities across largely monoracial home and school contexts, we contribute to existing literature on multiracial identities.

Research on multiracial identity has focused on the patterns of identity among multiracial students, and the identification of ecological, social, and psychological factors in the development of multiracial identities (Renn, 2008). For example, Rockquemore (1998) finds that Black/White biracial individuals take on various identity choices. These identity choices include: a singular identity (exclusively Black or exclusively White); a border identity (exclusively biracial); a protean identity, meaning that identities are interchangeable given the social context; and lastly, a transcendent identity, refusing a racial identity altogether (1998). Research on ecological factors has found that physical appearance, peer culture, and cultural knowledge impact multiracial identity development among college students (Renn, 2004; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Cleary, there is not a singular way multiracial individuals choose to self-identify across their lives. While much of the multiracial literature has focused on the Black/White multiracial experience, we suspect that multiracial Latinx students also experience multiracial identity in a variety of ways.

Multiracial population in the United States

The US Census first allowed individuals to identify with more than one racial group in 2000. Since then, the multiracial population in the United States has been growing. The 2020 Census, for example showed a large increase in the multiracial population, a 276 percent increase since 2010, from 9 million to 33.8 million

(Jones et al., 2021) The multiracial population in the US went from 2.9 percent in 2010 to 10.2 percent of the population in 2020 (2021). These trends are not surprising as they correspond with a rising growth of interracial marriages. The share of married couples with spouses of different races increased from 7 percent in 1980 to 17 percent in 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2017).

However, a recent report suggests that this rise is likely due to the ways in which the census classified multiracial individuals rather than real shifts in racial/ethnic identity (Starr and Pao, 2024). The researchers found that anyone who marked themselves as Black or White on the 2020 Census form but then also noted a Latin American origin were reclassified as multiracial even though individuals identified themselves as a single race (2024). The same reclassification was made for people who self-identified as White but noted origins from an African country. The Latin American reclassification case demonstrates the challenges of understanding racial/ethnic identity of the Latinx population, let along the multiracial Latinx population, largely because the term Latinx is a pan-ethnic, not a racial term.

Multiracial Latinx identity

For the purposes of this book, we define multiracial Latinx identity as someone who has one biological parent who identifies as Latinx (regardless of race) and another biological parent who is not Latinx (regardless of race). Per this definition, the multiracial Latinx population is difficult to identify using census information because the term Latinx is a pan-ethnic term, so the population can identify by one or more racial categories since 2000. In fact, between 2010 and 2020, the number of people of Latinx origin

reporting more than one race increased by 567 percent from 3 million to 20.3 million (Jones et al., 2021).

Scholars have pointed to the difficulty of understanding the Latinx population in racial or ethnic terms (Acuña, 2003; Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Rumbaut, 2009). While scholars understand the nuance between ethnicity and race, many people who claim to be Latinx are informed by their lived experiences when filling out forms, such as the census. In other words, even though labels such as Hispanic or Latino/a refer to ethnicity, many who identify as Latinx see this term as their racial classification as well. On census forms, after noting Latinx as their ethnicity, many who check Latinx do not choose one of the standard racial classifications offered by the census (e.g., White, Black, Asian). Instead, they opt for "some other race" and write in a specific Latinx ethnic identity such as "Mexican" or "Puerto Rican," or a Latinx pan ethnic term such as "Latin American," or "Hispanic." In short, many Latinxs see "Latinx" as their ethnic AND racial identity. This is not surprising due to the increased racialization of this population in the public sphere (Cobas, Duany, and Feagin, 2009; Flores-González, 2017).

On the other hand, others may be fully aware of the differences between ethnicity and race but choose to challenge the racialization of the population by noting a multiracial identity on census documents. Multiracial identity among the Latinx population is easily rationalized because the population is technically the product of European colonization of Indigenous and Black populations throughout Mexico, Central America, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Then again, opting for a multiracial label on census documents to reject the racialization of the population makes it difficult to discern whether multiracial Latinx identity

is a product of an interracial marriage between a Latinx (regardless of race) person and someone who is not Latinx; or someone whose parents are both ethnically Latinx but recognize that the population is truly a mixture of Black, White, and Indigenous heritage. This latter classification however, can lead to romantic notions of *mestizaje* or *latinidad*, which tend to render Afro-Latinx and Indigenous Latinx people invisible (Flores, 2021).

At this point, we are inclined to note that this work on the experiences of multiracial Latinx students does not suggest that we are invested in perceptions that they are "pure" races or that race is biologically driven. As social scientists, we believe that race is a social construction. Socially constructed racial categories, however, have historically produced very real inequitable material outcomes for individuals. Scholars have pointed to racial bias in education (Tyson, 2011), the housing market (Rothstein, 2017), the workplace (Chavez, 2021), and various other social institutions or processes that frequently leave racialized minorities at a disadvantage. Much of this disadvantage is produced precisely because people believe there are biological differences between racial groups (Smedley and Smedley, 2005).

We are encouraged by scholars such as Kris Renn (2004) who argue that studying multiracial identity with existing socially constructed racial categories, "is the key to moving beyond racial categories" (pg.3). These socially constructed racial categories impact the lived experiences of multiracial people, largely because our society operates with a monoracial lens which makes it difficult for multiracial individuals to find a sense of place and belonging in various social contexts. By focusing on multiracial Latinx students, we aim to build some base knowledge on an

understudied population to help move beyond racial categories and disrupt a monoracial lens.

Theoretical framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) guides this work in understanding how multiracial Latinx students have navigated monoracial home and school contexts. CRT in education as described by Solórzano (1998), "challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they related to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups" (pg. 122). Solórzano outlines five basic tenets of critical race theory in education: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism in our society; 2) the challenge to dominant ideologies that suggest our educational institutions operate under objectivity and/or a meritocracy; 3) the commitment to social justice; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective that requires analysis of both contemporary and historical context (1998).

This qualitative study brings to bear three of the five tenets of critical race theory in education. First, to examine how multiracial Latinx students have navigated monoracial home and school contexts, we must understand how they make meaning of their racial/ethnic identities. Conceptualizations of multiracial Latinx ethnic identity necessarily engage with the assumption that race and racism are inherent to American institutions because the Latinx population in the US is an increasingly racialized population (see Cobas et al., 2015) despite its ethnic diversity, among other social identities. Even past models of racial/ethnic identity development typically note that an experience with racism

often triggers a stage of reflection that moves racially/ethnically minoritized individuals closer towards a fully committed racial/ethnic identity (Torres and Hernandez, 2007; Torres, Hernandez, and Martinez, 2019). And because our society largely functions with a monoracial lens, we suspect multiracial Latinx students will report many challenges to their multiracial identities. Second, in asking how multiracial Latinx students navigate school contexts, the study also engages in a social justice endeavor. We hope findings highlight ways to improve student services for an increasingly diverse Latinx college student population on college campuses. Finally, by interviewing multiracial Latinx students this study validates the experiential knowledge of a population of Latinx students often not represented in the multiracial experience scholarship.

If our study linked aspects of navigating a multiracial Latinx identity with student academic achievement and/or retention, we could engage with the tenet that challenges dominant ideologies around objectivity and meritocracy of educational institutions, but a longitudinal study would be necessary for this endeavor. And while our study does not directly engage with history to contextualize the present experiences of multiracial Latinx students in home and school communities, we would be remiss to forget that interracial marriages have only been legal for less than sixty years, and schools (K-12 and higher education) often excluded racialized groups such as the Latinx population. Our study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How have multiracial Latinx students made sense of their racial/ethnic identities in their home communities?

2. How have multiracial Latinx students made sense of their racial/ethnic identities at a predominantly White institution of higher education?
3. How have these multiracial identities impacted if, where, and how student access affinity groups and/or campus organizations, such as culture centers?
    a. If not culture centers, where have multiracial Latinx students found a sense of place or belonging on campus?

Methodology

Since research on multiracial Latinx students is rather sparse, we concluded that qualitative interviews would be the best way to capture some base knowledge on the experiences of this population. Our data come from semi-structured interviews with 27 self-identified multiracial Latinx students at a large Midwestern, public university. On average, this public institution enrolls about 38,000 undergraduate students every year. About 8.5 percent of undergraduates identify as Hispanic or Latinx. Criteria for participation was to be a currently enrolled undergraduate student at Midwestern University (MU); and identifying as multiracial Latinx, with one parent who identifies as Latinx (regardless of race), and the other who identifies as non-Latinx (regardless of race).

First round of recruitment took place February through April of 2022. We placed flyers around campus and sent emails to our social networks, mostly directors of culture centers or curricular programs for students of color. A QR code linked to a Google document allowed interested students to share their contact information. We contacted students to set up a day and time for a Zoom interview. This recruitment strategy resulted in quite a bit

of interest as 58 students shared their contact information, but it only produced 14 interviews. A second round of recruitment took place September through December 2022. Once again, we posted flyers around campus, but the QR code linked to a Text Me app. We would receive an immediate text message when students scanned the QR code. The benefit of this strategy was the captive audience as we were able to discern eligibility and set up a Zoom interview quickly. During this time frame, we interviewed an additional 16 participants for a total of 30. Participants received $20 gift card for their time. Interview questions focused on family background, students own meaning making of their multiracial identities, how racial/ethnic identity was understood in nuclear and extended families, early schooling experiences (middle school and high school), and how they have navigated their multiracial identities at MU. Interviews were between 30 and 90 minutes long with average around 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded via Zoom with the transcript option enabled. Transcripts were reviewed and cleaned for accuracy and uploaded to NVivo, a qualitative software program. To interpret interview data, we utilized line-by-line coding using some pre-established codes (e.g., racism, racial/ethnic ambiguity) as well as emic coding strategies to understand how our participants were making sense of their identities across home and school contexts.

We interviewed a total of 30 students but three excluded from the analysis because a few minutes into the interview, it was clear they did not meet the criteria. Among our 27 participants, 14 self-identified as male and 13 as female. The age range was between 18 and 23 with an average age of 19.6 years of age. Most of our participants were first- or second-year students at MU. Eleven

were in their first-year, 5 in their second-year, 8 in their third year, and 3 in their fourth or senior year at MU. Our interviewees largely had one White and one Mexican parent (15). Since most of our interviewees were from the state in which MU is located, it is not surprising to see that the most common parent pairing was White/Mexican. About three-quarters of the Latinx population in the state identifies as Mexican (National Council of La Raza, 2021). Interviewees came from a variety of majors: Education, STEM (including pre-med and pre-nursing), Business, and majors from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Our respondents used a variety of terms to self-identify—Latino/a, Hispanic, multiracial, biracial, or mixed. Rarely, if ever did they employ the term Latinx. This does not come as a surprise because while familiarity with the term has increased since 2019, only 4 percent of Latinx adults say they use the term to describe themselves (Pew Research Center, 2024). So, we will provide a brief note about the terms employed in this book.

Generally, the racial/ethnic terms or labels people use to self-identify are highly subjective, resulting in a variety of terms employed from person to person; the Latinx population is no exception. Among this population, there can be a preference for pan-ethnic terms such as "Latino/a," or "Hispanic" or specific Latinx ethnic terms such as "Mexican American," "Puerto Rican," "Cuban," and so forth. Scholars too, have debated the correct way to describe or label the Latinx population with the most heated debates around the most common pan-ethnic terms, "Hispanic" and "Latino/a" (Alcoff, 2005). Some argue that "Hispanic" is the best descriptor for the population because it focuses on the Spanish colonization of Indigenous people in Latin America (see

Alcoff, 2005). And precisely because of this focus on Spanish colonization, others argue that it renders Blackness and Indigeneity among the population invisible, advocating for the term "Latino/a" (Flores, 2021). Further, since 2015 or so, we have seen a push for the use of more gender inclusive language which resulted in the term "Latinx," which disrupts the gender binary implied by "Latino/a" (2021). But despite more awareness of this term among the public, only four percent of Latinx adults use this term to describe themselves (Pew Research Center, 2024). Overall, racial/ethnic self-identification can be highly political for some as Alcoff (2005) suggests, but for others it may simply be a product of using terms most seen in public discourse.

In this book, when speaking about the population in general terms, we will use "Latinx" because we feel it is the most inclusive term, as it was created to disrupt the gender binary implied by using Latino/a. But when discussing details of existing scholarship, we will use the exact terms used by the authors. Oftentimes, this includes terms such as "Latino/a," "Hispanic," or "Chicano/a" because the term Latinx was not widespread in higher education before 2015. Lastly, we will honor the ways in which our interviewees self-identified which often was not "Latinx" as noted above.

The central aim of this book is to center the lived experiences of multiracial Latinx students as they have navigated home and K-16 educational settings. In many ways, the goal is to establish some baseline knowledge on this understudied multiracial population. In chapter 2 we focus on how multiracial Latinx students have navigated their racial/ethnic identities early in life by focusing on home and K-12 school communities. We explore how

both nuclear and extended family members have understood students' multiracial Latinx identities, and we show that early schooling experiences often trigger the first feelings of being out of place with respect to race and ethnicity. In chapter 3 we focus on students' transitions to a predominantly White higher education institution. It is in this chapter that we explicitly explore the idea of crafting a sense of place and belonging. In chapter 4 we take a close look at the role of Latinx culture centers in the lives of multiracial Latinx students. We explore whether Latinx culture centers play a critical role in the integration of multiracial Latinx students on a college campus. In the concluding chapter, we outline some recommendations for higher education institutions and Latinx culture centers aimed at disrupting a monoracial lens and embracing a more diverse understanding of Latinx identity to make room for multiracial Latinx identities. We end with a collective call to action to end monoracism in our everyday lives.

2
Navigating multiracial Latinx identity in home communities

> "When I'm home…around people I'm comfortable with, I feel like I don't really have to explain or talk about race or ethnicity at all. It's just kind of understood."
>
> ~ Patrick (3rd year student, White and Mexican)

> "But with extended family, that's when it gets complicated 'cause again my mom's side of the family really loving, very disappointed in me for not fully being what they want me to be, which is Hispanic. And my dad's side, they're disappointed in me because I'm not fully white, which not my fault. I was just born that way."
>
> ~ Cassie (2nd year student, White and Mexican)

How multiracial individuals come to understand their racial/ethnic identities is a complex endeavor, often a lifelong process of evaluation and reevaluation. Much of the scholarship on ethnic-racial socialization (ERS) notes this as a process that begins at home, where

children internalize verbal and nonverbal messages on race and ethnicity from parents (Hughes et al., 2006; Phinney and Rotheram, 1987). Others have acknowledged that school, neighborhood, and peers also serve as early ethnic-racial socializing agents (see Zamora and Padilla, 2024). But much of this ERS research has assumed that parents and children match racial ethnic identities (Atkin and Yoo, 2019). As a result, ethnic-racial socialization of multiracial youth has been understudied or misunderstood.

Research focused on the multiracial experience has largely been dedicated to understanding the Black/White biracial experience, thus the multiracial Latinx experience is grossly understudied. A few studies on multiracial Latinx youth note that when one parent identifies as White, they may struggle to help their multiracial children understand or make sense of racialized experiences (see Zamora and Padilla, 2024). And multiracial children are more likely to identify with their non-White parent of color (i.e., Native, Asian) rather than with the White parent, except in cases where their phenotype did not match the stereotypical image of a person of color (Iwasaki and Byrd, 2010; Khanna, 2004). Overall, even a non-White monoracial parent may struggle to understand multiracial experiences because of the pervasiveness of monoraciality. These challenges suggest that ethnic racial socialization into the multiracial experience is limited for multiracial youth.

Racial/ethnic identity development models

How multiracial Latinx students experience home and school communities can also be informed by racial/ethnic identity

development models. Foundational theories of biracial identity development include Poston (1990) and Root's (1990) linear models, which critique previous studies showing that healthy biracial identities were impossible to achieve (see Renn, 2008). Recent research on biracial identity focuses on the patterns of identity among multiracial students, and the identification of ecological, social, and psychological factors in the development of multiracial identities (Renn, 2008). For example, Rockquemore (1998) finds that Black/white biracial individuals take on various identity choices. These include: a singular identity (exclusively Black or exclusively white); a border identity (exclusively biracial); a protean identity, meaning that identities are interchangeable given the social context; and lastly, a transcendent identity, refusing a racial identity altogether (1998). And research on ecological factors has found that physical appearance, peer culture, and cultural knowledge impact multiracial identity development among college students (Renn, 2004; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Ecological models of multiracial college student identities leave room for conceptualizing multiracial Latinx identity, but few if any scholars have explicitly examined multiracial Latinx identity development.

Latinx ethnic identity models such as the Latinx lifespan model (Torres, Hernandez, and Martinez, 2019) do not explicitly address the development of multiracial Latinx identity but can be useful. Their model suggests that early understandings of Latinx identity are largely externally defined. In other words, Latinx youth understand their racial ethnic identities in the same way their Latinx parents define themselves. Obviously, this can pose a challenge to multiracial Latinx youth as the ERS literature has shown.

The value of the model is that it acknowledges that Latinx identity is constantly negotiated and/or reevaluated based on social context. Changes in the racial/ethnic composition of an environment or social group, a major life event (e.g., marriage), or a singular experience with racism can trigger a reevaluation of identity. In short, the model argues that racial/ethnic identity is not static over time. Since multiracial Latinx identity development is misunderstood, this chapter aims to provide some base knowledge on multiracial Latinx students' early experiences.

More specifically, this chapter explores how multiracial Latinx students have navigated their racial/ethnic identities in home and school communities. Overall, they described a wide range of experiences—from a tacit understanding of identity to overt racism from family, peers, and teachers. While home was identified as the place half of our interviewees felt their most authentic selves, home was not immune to tension and overt racism. In school on the other hand, multiracial Latinx students became more acutely aware of their racial/ethnic identities. And while racially diverse peer groups and schools proved more welcoming for multiracial Latinx students, it was not always the case. The monoracial lens operating in schools made it difficult for interviewees to replicate the same sense of belonging as at home and among hometown friends.

Navigating identity in nuclear families

Understanding one's racial/ethnic identity begins at home, as parents are typically the first agents of socialization in understanding how race and/or ethnicity operate in society. Messages

about how race and/or ethnicity operate in society can be complex in homes with monoracial parents and multiracial children. Monoracial White parents, for example, can struggle to understand their children's racialized experiences (Zamora and Padilla, 2024). Even monoracial parents who identify as part of a historically marginalized racial/ethnic group can struggle to understand their children's multiracial experiences, largely because our society functions with a monoracial lens. A look at how multiracial students navigate this identity amongst their nuclear family shows that respondents described a variety of experiences, ranging from absolute acceptance to overt racism.

"There's no place like home:" Feeling understood at home

Since home has traditionally been conceptualized as the quintessential safe space (Mallett, 2004), it is not surprising to find that many respondents described home as being the place where their identities were best understood and accepted. Interviewees felt comfort in the fact that, unlike in other spaces, they did not have to explain the complexities of their identities to their parents and/or siblings. Thirteen respondents named their homes as the place they felt their most authentic senses of self. When asked when she felt like her authentic self regarding her racial/ethnic identity, Tiffany, a first-year of Mexican and White descent, responded as follows:

> I think like when I'm with my family is when I feel the most because that's just like, there's never been like complications or confusion about like who we are. I mean obviously there always will be, but it's always like any

> feelings or emotions about it, it's always embraced and like felt there. It's never like something you have to hide.

At home, Tiffany felt her identity was embraced and that she could be her authentic self. As the other members of her family loved her and understood her identity, she never felt as if she had to hide who she was. Outside of the home, Tiffany oftentimes felt as if her identity was judged by others and not readily accepted.

Jason, a first-year of Venezuelan and White descent, felt as if his nuclear family understood his identity best because of their shared experiences:

> My family that I consider actually family is my brothers and my mom. No one else, I mean, because everybody else has their own culture. But no one else quite gets it like my brothers, and my mom is super understanding because she raised us and everything. But it's really weird. I, it just means like extended family it doesn't matter. They're all just like you're oh, you're Jason, or oh, if it is my brother's like oh, you're Tony. It's just they view you for who you are, ethnicity and race disregarded. At least within my family, it's just like we that, we do the same thing. Relate without having to speak about it, about our ethnicity. And I mean that's really about it. No one else quite gets it like the other people who are going through the same thing as you.

Jason felt as if his family members understood him and viewed him as a complete person rather than seeing his race and/or ethnicity. He felt as if no one else could understand his identity as well as "the other people who are going through the same thing,"