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Mixed Race, Mixed Identities, and Indigeneity: Context and Theory

Zarine L. Rocha

Abstract: In the opening piece of this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, “Mixedness and Indigeneity in the Pacific,” Zarine L. Rocha provides context and theory for the issue’s unpacking of mixed race, mixed identities, and Indigeneity.

Keywords: mixed race, identity, Pacific region, Indigenous perspectives, critical mixed race studies

Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* is unique, in that it explores what it means to be mixed—racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically—from Indigenous points of view in the Pacific. While much recent research has explored mixedness in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific region, how mixed racial and ethnic identities are understood by Indigenous peoples has not frequently been a focus. In this special issue, we see Indigenous understandings of identity and belonging as crucial in developing and critiquing the current scholarship around mixed race, bringing in understandings of mixedness that depart markedly from Western conceptions of race, mixed race, and belonging and positioning mixed identities as contextual, cultural, and shifting.

The collection as a whole looks at mixed identities specifically in the Pacific region, recentring dialogue around what it means to be mixed in the twenty-four nations and territories in Oceania, across the thirty million square kilometers of the Pacific Ocean.¹ These countries encompass diverse ethnic groups and histories, affected by different forms and timelines of colonialism, yet the enduring identity is one of Indigenous cultures, histories, and languages.

Across these contexts, mixedness can be theorized and experienced in different ways and structured in discrete forms of classification and language around mixing and social/cultural acceptance or the stigmatization of certain heritages. As Tahu Kukutai and Patrick Broman emphasize, Indigenous cultures across the Pacific are by no means homogenous, and historical understandings of race and ethnicity have been indelibly influenced by colonial histories.² Indigenous perceptions of mixedness highlight how cultural belonging, mixed race, and heritage are not understood in the same way across all contexts, and colonial oppression has left a significant mark on how belonging is conceptualized.³ Jocelyn Linnekin and Lin Poyer stress that while kinship/community groups have

¹ Kukutai and Broman, “Colonial Categories to Local Culture,” 693.

² Ibid., 693–95.

³ Rocha, “Re-viewing Race and Mixedness,” 511–12.

always been essential to Indigenous societies, organization along racial/ethnic lines did not exist in the same way prior to colonialism and understandings of mixedness have similarly shifted and changed over time.⁴

Indigenous conceptions of mixedness are at the fore in this special issue. Acknowledging that much mainstream research into both Indigeneity and mixed race is built on Western philosophical underpinnings about race, heritage, and belonging, the authors of these articles hope to provide an alternative perspective, highlighting that these existing frameworks can obscure the rich detail of contextualized Indigenous approaches to mixed race. The collection seeks to move past seeing Indigenous individuals and communities as “the researched,” reframing approaches and allowing for open and equitable participation and storytelling.⁵ Expressions of and discussions around mixedness and Indigeneity have transcended disciplines and approaches, from the written and analytical, spoken, and arts-based, to the visual, poetic, and literary. Torika Bolatagici has illustrated the value of visual representations of mixedness as counternarratives to scholarly frameworks, while Karin Louise Hermes draws on the power of poetry, written and oral, in expressing, analyzing, and recreating what it means to be mixed and Indigenous.⁶

By focusing on the Pacific region, the contributors to this special issue explore how context and different intellectual histories shape how we understand mixedness, giving space to marginal approaches to mixing and ways to belong. These articles widen the geographical diversity of research in the field, highlighting key contexts where unexpected and enlightening conceptualizations of mixedness have developed and including more of the world within the field of critical mixed race studies.⁷ Importantly, we hope to emphasize seeing mixedness as “in place,” firmly grounded in social and historical context.⁸ The importance of connecting mixedness and belonging to place is illuminated by the articles that make up this collection: place and connection to place being recognized as particularly important by all cultures in the region.⁹

This brief contextual and theoretical outline aims to highlight some key issues in the field, showcasing the unique contributions of the articles, rather than laying out a generalized and simplistically comprehensive overview of global complexity. The authors contribute to the dialogue on mixedness and Indigeneity, but do not seek to speak for all Indigenous communities, nor to assume that this collection provides the final word on the subject. To acknowledge my positioning, I am a woman of mixed Pakeha and Gujarati heritage, born and living in Aotearoa New Zealand. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I recognize my position of outsider and seek to facilitate the publication of this special issue rather than dictate its contents. I have felt both privileged and humbled to be involved in this collection, learning more about the richness of the region where I make my home.

⁴ Linnekin and Poyer, *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, 10–11.

⁵ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1–3.

⁶ Bolatagici, “Claiming the (N)either/(N)or of “Third Space,”” 75–76; Hermes, “Female Voice in Pasifika Poetry,” 655–56.

⁷ See Rocha, “Re-viewing Race and Mixedness,” 510–13.

⁸ Mahtani, “What’s in a Name?,” 476.

⁹ Fozdar and McGavin, “Introduction,” 7–8.

The process of putting together this issue has not been straightforward, beginning just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and working through the significant difficulties and delays of this period along the way. All around the world, Indigenous communities have been disproportionately affected by this pandemic, and Indigenous scholars have shouldered a significant burden.¹⁰ Knowing how hard it has been to keep working while taking on additional responsibilities around family, health care, and schooling, I am very grateful to the Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors who contributed to this collection.

I am also thankful to have worked with the founding journal editor, G. Reginald Daniel, who expertly guided the preparation of this issue. Reg's passing at the end of 2022 was devastating, and he is very missed as a kind friend and a generous colleague. He had such enthusiasm for the subject of this special issue, and dedicated himself to supporting the scholars who have contributed. Knowing how much the issue meant to Reg, I am so glad that we have been able to bring it to publication, in large part thanks to the significant efforts of the new editor, Alyssa M. Newman.

Indigeneity, the Pacific, and Critical Mixed Race Studies

The special issue as a whole explores what mixedness means and has meant across the Pacific and how it is expressed in, or alongside, present-day identity formations of Indigeneity and Indigenous conceptions of belonging. Recognizing that Indigenous voices have long been made invisible through the dominance of colonial ideologies in the region, this collection draws out Indigenous perspectives, critically approaching critical mixed race studies to see current theorizing in a different light—a “recursive and self-reflexive” critical turn, an exploration of the intersections of Indigeneity, race, colonialism, power, and identity.¹¹ The collection adds to a body of research that stresses that there is no single definition or conceptualization of race, mixed race, or mixedness and that mixing means many things across time, place, and space.¹²

The articles provide an illuminating window into understandings of mixedness in the Pacific region, moving away from Western-focused theorization and research through imperial eyes.¹³ They challenge colonial processes of knowledge production by showing that mixedness can be, and is, viewed otherwise: disrupting dominant colonial narratives of racial belonging by centering stories and identities from outside of the colonizing settler gaze.¹⁴ Drawing on the contributions and depth of critical mixed race studies, the authors show how mixedness is shaped by key social, cultural, and political structures based on dominant conceptions of race and belonging and how centering Indigenous perspectives adds further strength and insight to this field.¹⁵ By seeing mixedness as both

¹⁰ Barber and Naepi, “Sociology in a Crisis,” 693–96.

¹¹ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 7. See also Sullivan, “Indigenous Australian Women’s Colonial Sexual Intimacies,” 398.

¹² Fozdar, “Pride and Prejudice,” 408–9; Fozdar “This Is Not How We Talk about Race Anymore,” 1–3; O’Riain King et al., *Global Mixed Race*, vii–xx; Rocha, “Re-viewing Race and Mixedness,” 520–22.

¹³ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1–3.

¹⁴ Bolatagici, “Claiming the (N)either/(N)or of ‘Third Space,’” 81–83; Beals and Wilson, “Mixed-Blood,” 33.

¹⁵ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 8.

created by and outside of colonial frameworks of race and belonging, these articles demonstrate that “a language of possibility exists within our own alternative, oppositional ways of knowing.... The fact that we adhere to, that we can imagine a connection suggests a resistance to being classified according to the definitions of a dominant group.”¹⁶

Exploring mixedness and Indigenous identity in the Pacific is inextricably tied to the varied histories of colonialism in the region, from settler to extractive, and the colonial views of Indigenous bodies, identities, and forms of knowledge.¹⁷ As described by G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas, the vocabulary and conceptualizations of mixedness have different meanings depending on the political, social, and cultural dynamics of each context, particularly where histories of movement, colonization, and imperialism complicate histories of mixing and bound the concept of racial categorization. The critical aspect of critical mixed race theorization allows us to acknowledge and explore these histories, providing a lens that enables the examination of the comparative processes of racialization, as imposed and reimagined by historical colonization and contemporary structural inequalities.¹⁸

In the Pacific, as in many other contexts, ethnic and racial classification was a key instrument of colonial and political control. As Kukutai and Broman emphasize, state imperatives to dominate, include, or exclude local Indigenous peoples influenced key decisions about who was counted and why.¹⁹ Understandings of race, and therefore mixed race, were used to justify and bolster colonial dominance and to minimize the participation and legitimation of Indigenous people in economic and political life. Classifying mixedness and Indigeneity under colonial rule was not simply about identity but also about power.²⁰ Thus, Indigenous conceptions of belonging were neither acknowledged nor understood. The complexity of local groupings did not map easily onto colonial classificatory projects, and the recorded simple measurements of race, belonging, and identity did little to reflect Indigenous understandings of difference, sameness, and mixedness. As an example, the widely used categories of Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian have a contested history, growing out of nineteenth-century European racial typology: although potentially providing a useful geographical distinction, the categories themselves contain significant internal diversity and the weight of a racialized, othering history.²¹

These articles then look at things otherwise: offering a different perspective, a centering on Indigeneity in the Pacific.²² They show that Indigenous knowledge and ways of approaching human difference make a unique contribution to the field of critical mixed race studies.²³ While conceptualizations of and research into mixed race are inextricably linked to colonial histories and

¹⁶ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 204.

¹⁷ Sullivan, “Indigenous Australian Women’s Colonial Sexual Intimacies,” 397–99.

¹⁸ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 23–24, 26.

¹⁹ Kukutai and Broman, “Colonial Categories to Local Culture,” 692.

²⁰ Rocha, “Re-viewing Race and Mixedness,” 516.

²¹ Kukutai and Broman, “Colonial Categories to Local Culture,” 695.

²² Fozdar and McGavin, “Introduction,” 7–8; Sullivan, “Indigenous Australian Women’s Colonial Sexual Intimacies,” 399–400.

²³ See Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1–7; Thaman, “Decolonizing Pacific Studies,” 1–3.

imperial conquest, the articles illuminate some of these intersections and omissions: “Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate, but also serve to tell an alternative story.”²⁴ For Indigenous peoples in the Pacific, mixedness was not conceptualized in terms of colonial race-based difference. As Kukutai and Broman stress, “groupings such as ethnicity did not exist as meaningful categories until after European contact and colonialism. While cultural distinctions always existed between the region’s inhabitants, these were traditionally fluid and transmutable.”²⁵

Understandings of mixedness in the contemporary Pacific are then complex and diverse. Histories of colonialism, migration, and local conceptions of belonging point to a wide variety of cultural identities, and mixedness is described in many different ways: for example, *Afakasi* in Samoan, *hafekasi* in Tongan, *demi* in Tahiti Nui, *métis* in Kanaky/New Caledonia, and *hapa* in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i all describe Pacific identities of mixed heritage.²⁶ The Pacific is home to many different Indigenous cultures, each of which approaches heritage and mixedness from an alternative and equally valid perspective.²⁷ Identity itself can be conceptualized differently, as described by Hermes in her work on Pacific poets and hybridity: “identity can be read as a journey rather than a fixed departure point or destination. As the Pacific poets here describe, they traverse this wide ocean to find their roots in ancestral lands, first tentatively then more confidently, finally embracing all the parts of themselves, including the struggles and the pain these may bring.”²⁸

Indigeneity and Mixedness across the Globe

While this issue is firmly centered on the Pacific, other scholars have explored Indigenous identity and mixedness in other parts of the world. In the Americas, research has drawn out the implications of the colonial legacy of violence toward and intermixing with Indigenous peoples.²⁹ In the US context, much work has looked at how identity, and mixed identity, is tied to place and the importance of ancestral homelands.³⁰ The power of recognizing connection to the land, viewing homelands as physical places with cultural and spiritual meaning, inflects how identity and mixedness is understood by Indigenous peoples in the Americas.³¹ In Canada, scholars have worked to re-center the discussion on Indigenous voices, with a significant amount of research exploring the development of, and controversies around, *métis* identities.³² Research across North America highlights the lingering impacts of conceptions of blood quantum and colonial classification, suggesting that “there

²⁴ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2.

²⁵ Kukutai and Broman, “Colonial Categories to Local Culture,” 695.

²⁶ Hermes, “Female Voice in Pasifika Poetry,” 655.

²⁷ Thaman, “Decolonizing Pacific Studies,” 10–12.

²⁸ Hermes, “Female Voice in Pasifika Poetry,” 666.

²⁹ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 18.

³⁰ For example, see Liebler, “Homelands and Indigenous identities,” 596–98.

³¹ Ibid.; Evers and Zepeda, *Home Places*, vii–xi.

³² Beals and Wilson, “Mixed-Blood,” 29–30. On *métis* identities, see, for example, Kwan-Lafond and Winterstein, “Canadian Census and Mixed Race,” 75–94.

is a belief, by some, that the mixing of blood is associated with cultural loss, and that the only way to ensure the continuation of Indigenous cultures is to keep the blood lines ‘pure.’ This ‘blood hegemony’ has become internalized by some Indigenous communities as a form of lateral violence, claiming only full-bloods can be the arbiters of Native cultures.”³³

As noted by Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas, Indigenous peoples around the world face many challenges to their identities: mixed heritage becomes a question of authenticity, particularly when rights and access to resources are defined by the state.³⁴ In South America, questions of *mestizaje* and *mestiçagem* highlight the power of historical specificities and differing legacies of colonialism in determining belonging, as well as the nuances around language across the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking continent.³⁵ Explorations of mixedness are laid against long narratives of Indigenous suppression and oppression, yet mixing in itself can provide an interesting lens through which to view contemporary identity choices. As Jan Hoffman French describes, *mestizaje* can become an analytical tool to conceptualize an alternative model of Indigenous identity making, through recognizing an Indigenous strand of a mestizo identity.³⁶

Returning to the Pacific region, research exploring mixedness in Australia illustrates the complexities of Indigenous identity and state projects of monoculturalism and multiculturalism. The gap between Western racial terminology and classification and Indigenous Aboriginal concepts of identity comes to the fore in understanding mixed Indigenous identities in Australia.³⁷ Against a racialized and destructive background of colonialism and assimilation, mixed identities were classified by blood quantum, and “mixed-race” Indigenous children were frequently forcibly removed from Indigenous families (“the Stolen Generations”) for much of the twentieth century.³⁸

Attempts to define or classify “mixed” or “part” Aboriginal identities thus carry with them a significant historical weight, a reminder of the destructive tools of colonial control. As Maureen Perkins describes, Aboriginal identity is more about cultural connection than about biological link.³⁹ By moving away from theories around race and descent, definitions of Aboriginality are based on a relationship to traditional knowledges and to the land: there is no part Aboriginal, as being Indigenous means belonging in Australia and having a right to Indigenous knowledges.⁴⁰ However, things are increasingly complex for those of mixed Indigenous heritage in contemporary Australia: positioned within a neoliberal, multicultural state, being mixed and Aboriginal means facing discrimination for being Aboriginal and, in some cases, for not being Aboriginal enough. As multiplicity is more accepted for migrant identities within the narrative of national belonging, “the migrant mixed person

³³ Sam Pack, cited in Beals and Wilson, “Mixed-Blood,” 31.

³⁴ Daniel et al., “Emerging Paradigms,” 18. See also Fozdar, “Pride and Prejudice,” 410.

³⁵ French, “Mestizaje and Law Making,” 663–66; England, “Mixed and Multiracial in Trinidad and Honduras,” 197–204; Daniel and Hernández, “Mixed Race in Brazil,” 113–36.

³⁶ French, “Mestizaje and Law Making,” 666.

³⁷ Perkins, “Australian Mixed Race,” 179.

³⁸ Sullivan, “Indigenous Australian Women’s Colonial Sexual Intimacies,” 401; Fozdar, “Pride and Prejudice,” 410.

³⁹ Perkins, “Australian Mixed Race,” 179.

⁴⁰ Memmott and Long, “Place Theory and Place Maintenance,” 39–56; Perkins, “Australian Mixed Race,” 179–80.

‘value adds’ to Australian whiteness, the Aboriginal mixed is, literally, unrecognized, just as the history that generated this mixedness is denied.”⁴¹

Seeing Mixedness Otherwise

As described in the introduction, this special issue brings together five very different articles, which explore mixedness in Aotearoa New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Kanaky/New Caledonia, and Guam. Each context has a different past and present, and these contributions demonstrate how mixedness and Indigeneity are firmly tied to place, space and belonging, positioning, and groundedness. These explorations into mixedness in the Pacific are not intended to be generalized to all Pacific locations, nations, and identities; instead, they provide insight into the complexities of identity in these particular contexts across time and space. By foregrounding Indigenous perspectives and approaches to mixing, this collection illustrates complexity and reflexivity, bringing together a group of diverse and astute authors from Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds. We allow the case studies to speak for themselves, with different voices and different perspectives. While some draw on theory developed in other contexts, others provide a more reflexive approach. Each article brings out something new and works to carefully and sensitively frame how mixedness can be seen otherwise.

It has been a privilege working to put together this collection of articles, exploring how they draw out common threads of belonging. Each piece illustrates Indigenous perspectives on and histories of mixedness and wholistic identity in each unique context, enriching critical mixed race studies and sociological understandings of the spaces within ethnic and cultural belonging. We hope that this issue works toward underlining the *critical* in critical mixed race studies, by focusing on the richness of research and privileging Indigenous knowledge, research, and histories.

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⁴¹ Fozdar, “Pride and Prejudice,” 420.

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