TONY BAKER, JR., a Brooklyn College phys ed major, can throw, kick, and dribble a ball while doing whirligigs around your head. He's confident on the field and court, and he's also grounded in who he is. He identifies as black, but knows his Korean eyes signal his ancestry. Yet he doesn't question this difference, he just embraces it.

A Different Mix

By **Jennifer Latson** / Photographs by **Celeste Sloman**

As a child, **LAYLA SHARIFI** spent a month in Japan every year. But being half Japanese and half Iranian meant that she was both idolized ("*You're so beautiful*") and bullied. She says, "I speak Japanese fluently, but I felt like an outsider." Now, she works as a model and lives in New York City; she's quite at home in a place where everyone is cosmopolitan.

People of mixed race occupy a unique position in the U.S. Their experience of both advantage and challenge may reshape how all Americans perceive race.

Graphic designer **ALEXIS MANSON**, half black and half Ngabe (an indigenous group in Panama), first realized she was unusual at age 9 when a boy drew a picture of her, showing a box with freckles as her head. She ran home and told her mom, who replied: "Well, you do look different." She's stopped explaining who she is, glad to leave that behind her.

ONE OF **THE** MOST **VEXING** PARTS of the multiracial experience, according to many who identify as such, is being asked, "What are you?" There's never an easy answer. Even when the question is posed out of demographic interest rather than leering curiosity, you're typically forced to pick a single race from a list or to check a box marked "other." ¶ Long before she grew up to be the Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle wrestled with the question on a 7th-grade school form. "You had to check one of the boxes to indicate your ethnicity: white, black, Hispanic, or Asian," Markle wrote in a 2015 essay. "There I was (my curly hair, my freckled face, my pale skin, my mixed race) looking down at these boxes, not wanting to mess up but not knowing what to do. You could only choose one, but that would be to choose one parent over the other—and one half of myself over the other. My teacher told me to check the box for Caucasian. 'Because that's how you look, Meghan.' "

The mother of all demographic surveys, the U.S. census, began allowing Americans to report more than one race only in 2000. Since then, however, the number of people ticking multiple boxes has risen dramatically.

Today, mixed-race marriages are at a high, and the number of multiracial Americans is growing three times as fast as the population as a whole, according to the Pew Research Center. Although multiracial people account for only an estimated 7 percent of Americans today, their numbers are expected to soar to 20 percent by 2050.

This population growth corresponds to an uptick in research about multiracials, much of it focused on the benefits of being more than one race. Studies show that multiracial people tend to be perceived as more attractive than their monoracial peers, among other advantages. And even some of the challenges of being multiracial—like having to navigate racial identities situationally—might make multiracial people more adaptable, creative, and open-minded than those who tick a single box, psychologists and sociologists say.

Of course, there are also challenges that don't come with a silver lining. Discrimination, for one, is still pervasive. For another, many mixed-race people describe struggling to develop a clear sense of identity—and some trace it to the trouble other people have in discerning their identity. In a recent Pew survey, one in five multiracial adults reported feeling pressure to claim just a single race, while nearly one in four said other people are sometimes confused about "what they are." By not fitting neatly into one category, however, researchers say the growing number of multiracial Americans may help the rest of the population develop the flexibility to see people as more than just a demographic—and to move away from race as a central marker of identity.

MULTIRACIALS face the highest rate of exclusion of any group. They're never black enough, white enough, Asian enough, Latino enough.

Hidden Figures

IN 2005, HEIDI DURROW was struggling to find a publisher for her novel about a girl who, like her, had a Danish mom and an African-American dad. At the time, no one seemed to think there was much of an audience for the biracial coming-of-age tale. Three years later, when Barack Obama was campaigning for president and the word *biracial* seemed to be everywhere, the literary landscape shifted. Durrow's book, *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky*, came out in 2010 and quickly became a bestseller.

How did an immense multiracial readership manage to fly under the publishing world's radar? The same way it's remained largely invisible since America was founded: Multiracial people simply weren't talking about being multiracial. "There's a long, forgotten history of mixed-race people having achieved great things, but they had to choose one race over the other. They weren't identified as multiracial," Durrow says. "Obama made a difference because he talked about it openly and in the mainstream."

When Durrow's father was growing up in the '40s and '50s, race relations were such that he felt the best bet for an African-American man was to get out of the country altogether. He joined the Air Force and requested a post in Germany. There he met Durrow's mother, a white Dane who was working on the base as a nanny. When they married, in 1965, they did so in Denmark. Interracial marriage was still illegal in much of the U.S.

Durrow grew up with a nebulous understanding of her

own identity. During her childhood, her father never told her he was black; she knew his skin was brown and his facial features were different from her mother's, but that didn't carry a specific meaning for her. Neither he nor her mother talked about race. It wasn't until Durrow was 11, and her family moved to the U.S., that the significance of race in America became clear to her. "When people asked 'What are you?' I wanted to say, 'I'm American,' because that's what we said overseas," she recalls. "But what they wanted to know was: 'Are you black or are you white?'"

Unlike at the diverse Air Force base in Europe, race seemed to be the most salient part of identity in the U.S. "In Portland, I suddenly realized that the color of your skin has something to do with who you are," she says. "The color of my eyes and the color of my skin were a bigger deal than the fact that I read a lot of books and I was good at spelling."

And since the rules seemed to dictate that you could be only one race, Durrow chose the one other people were most likely to pick for her: black. "It was unsettling because I felt as if I was erasing a big part of my identity, being Danish, but people thought I should say I was black, so I did. But I was trying to figure out what that meant."

She knew that a few other kids in her class were mixed, and while she felt connected to them, she respected their silence on the subject. There were, she came to realize, compelling reasons to identify as black and only black. The legacy of America's "one-drop rule"—the idea that anyone with any black ancestry was considered black—lingered. So, too, did the trope of the "tragic mulatto," damaged and doomed to fit into neither world.

Being black, however, also meant being surrounded by a strong, supportive community. The discrimination and disenfranchisement that had driven Durrow's father out of the U.S. had brought other African Americans closer together in the struggle for justice and equality. "There's always been solidarity among blacks to advance our rights for ourselves," Durrow says. "You have to think of this in terms of a racial identity that means something to a collective, to a community."

Today, Durrow still considers herself entirely African American. But she also thinks of herself as entirely Danish. Calling herself a 50-50 mix, she says, would imply that her identity is split down the middle. "I'm not interested in mixed-race identity in terms of percentages," she explains. "I don't feel like a lesser Dane or a lesser African American. I don't want to feel like I'm a person made of pieces."

She's always longed for a sense of community with other multiracial people who share her feeling of being multiple wholes. When she sees other mixed-race families in public, she often gives them a knowing nod, but mostly gets blank stares in return. "I definitely feel a kinship with other mixed-race people, but I understand when people don't," she says. "I wonder if that's rooted in the fact that they didn't know they were allowed to be more than one." It's true that the majority of Americans with a mixed racial background—61 percent, according to a 2015 Pew survey—don't identify as multiracial at all. Half of those report identifying as the race they most closely resemble.

It's also true that racial identity can change. The majority of multiracial people polled by Pew said their identity had

The Multiethnic Elite

People of Mixed Race Are Well Represented at the Top of Many Fields

1) Ann Curry: Japanese/Caucasian **2) Barack Obama**: Kenyan/Caucasian **3) Bruno Mars**: Puerto Rican/Ashkenazi Jewish/Filipino/Spanish **4) Derek Jeter**: African American/Caucasian **5) Dwayne Johnson**: Samoan/African Canadian/Caucasian **6) Kamala Harris**: Indian/Jamaican **7) Kimora Lee Simmons**: African American/Japanese **8) Keanu Reeves**: Chinese-Hawaiian/Caucasian **9) Maya Rudolph**: African American/Ashkenazi Jewish **10) Meghan Markle**: African American/Caucasian **11) Naomi Campbell**: Chinese/Jamaican **12) Naomi Osaka**: Japanese/Haitian **13) Norah Jones**: Indian/Caucasian **14) Ryan Lochte**: Cuban/Caucasian **15) Thandie Newton**: Zimbabwean/Caucasian **16) Soledad O'Brien**: Cuban/Caucasian **17) Tiger Woods**: Thai/Chinese/Caucasian/African American/Native American **18) Tracee Ellis Ross**: Ashkenazi Jewish/African American **19) Trevor Noah**: Xhosa/Caucasian

As a kid, **MAX SUGIURA** wanted to identify with his Japanese roots, but he was firmly entrenched in white culture—he's half Russian Jewish. As a teen, he put in a special effort to make friends with everyone. "I was a chameleon." Now, as an assistant high school principal, his chameleon traits help him navigate a dynamic student population.

evolved over the years: About a third had gone from thinking of themselves as multiple races to just one, while a similar number had moved in the opposite direction, from a single race to more than one.

The New Face of Flexibility

BECAUSE SHE CRAVED an opportunity to connect with other multiracial Americans, Durrow created one: the Mixed Remixed Festival. In 2014, the comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, both of whom have a black father and a white mother, were named the festival's storytellers of the year. Like Durrow's book, their Emmy-winning show, *Key & Peele*, had found an immense audience. They credit the show's network, Comedy Central, for recognizing them as biracial—not just black—and giving them a platform to tell that story. "The only thing they ever got annoying about was, 'More biracial stuff!' It was never, 'Make it blacker,' " Key said when the pair accepted their award.

"Comedy is something one relates to, and in discussing the mixed experience, we found a comedy that doesn't speak just to mixed people but to everybody," Peele said. "It's about being in an in-between place and being more complex than you are given credit for." As multiracial people become more visible and more vocal in mainstream America, researchers are paying more attention. And they're finding that being mixed-race carries many advantages along with its challenges.

This complexity is itself both an advantage and a disadvantage, says Sarah Gaither, a social psychologist at Duke University. Being a mix of races can lead to discrimination of a different kind than single-race minorities face, since multiracial people often endure stereotyping and rejection from multiple racial groups. "My research, and the work of others, argues that there are benefits and costs at the same time," Gaither says. "Multiracials face the highest rate of exclusion of any group. They're never black enough, white enough, Asian enough, Latino enough."

It's surprising, then, that more people in this group say being multiracial has been an advantage rather than a disadvantage—19 percent vs. 4 percent, according to a Pew survey. And Gaither's research found that those who identify as multiracial, instead of just one race, report higher self-esteem, greater well-being, and increased social engagement.

People can't fit video editor **DANIEL SIRCAR** into a box: "Why are you not all white?" But when he spent time in India, he felt like an outsider, an imposter. "I almost got a Bengali tattoo." But as someone who didn't grow up eating curry, nothing felt right to him. Now, his "woke" friends have changed all that and he's feeling pretty good.

On forms and documents, **TAMILIA SAINT-LOT** has many boxes to check—Ukrainian, German, Haitian, nonbinary. But she didn't live the black experience. "My friends called me an Oreo." They asked: "Why you talking white?" She didn't relate to being black or white, and was picked on from every side. Today, most of her friends are of mixed race and questions of her racial identity are nonexistent.

One advantage of embracing mixedness, she says, is the mental flexibility that multiracial people develop when, from a young age, they learn to switch seamlessly between their racial identities. In a 2015 study, she found that multiracial people demonstrated greater creative problem-solving skills than monoracials—but only after they'd been primed to think about their multiple identities beforehand.

These benefits aren't limited to mixed-race people, though. People of one race also have multiple social identities, and when reminded of this fact in Gaither's study, they, too, performed better on creativity tests. "We said, 'You're a student, an athlete, a friend.' When you remind them that they belong to multiple groups, they do better on these tasks," she says. "It's just that our default approach in society is to think of a person as one single identity." What gives multiracial people a creative edge may simply be that they have more practice navigating between multiple identities.

Being around multiracial people can boost creativity and agile thinking for monoracials, too, according to research by University of Hawaii psychologist Kristin Pauker. Humans are compartmentalizers by nature, and labeling others by social category is part of how we make sense of our interactions, she says.

Race is one such category. Humans have historically relied on it to decide whether to categorize someone as "in-group" or "out-group." Racially ambiguous faces, however, foil this essentialist approach. And that's a good thing, Pauker's research shows.

She found that just being exposed to a more diverse population—as often happens, say, when students move from the continental U.S. to Hawaii for college—leads to a reduction in race essentialism. It also softens the sharp edges of the in-group and out-group divide, leading to more egalitarian attitudes and an openness to people who might otherwise have been considered part of the out-group.

The students whose views evolved the most, however, were those who'd gone beyond just being exposed to diversity and had built diverse acquaintance networks as well. "We're not necessarily talking about their close friends—but people they've started to get to know," she says. What does that show us? "To change racial attitudes, it's not only being in a diverse environment and soaking things up that makes the difference: You have to formulate relationships with out-group members."

ZAK MIDDELMANN (Hui-Chinese/Caucasian) went to a high school that was 95 percent white, and while he met other ethnic groups later in college, many of them spoke different languages. Now, he feels at home working in a diverse tech industry. And when he walked into the photo shoot for this story, he thought, Oh, I belong here.

College student **ASA DELROSARIO CONNELL** (Filipino/Caucasian) might have felt a little different growing up, but he "was never ridiculed or singled out." Early on, though, he knew he had to learn about two very different cultures, keeping multiple perspectives in play. He's proud of that, and it helps him understand where he's coming from.

The Averageness Advantage

THE COGNITIVE BENEFITS of being biracial may stem from navigating multiple identities, but some researchers argue that multiracial people enjoy innate benefits as well—most notably, and perhaps controversially, the tendency to be perceived as better looking on average than their monoracial peers.

In a 2005 study, Japanese and white Australians found the faces of half-Japanese, half-white people the most attractive, compared with those of either their own race or other single races. White college students in the U.K., meanwhile, were shown more than 1,200 Facebook photos of black, white, and mixed-race faces in a 2009 study and rated the mixed-race faces the most attractive. Only 40 percent of the images used in the study were of mixed-race faces, but they represented nearly three-quarters of those that made it into the top 5 percent by attractiveness rating.

More recently, a 2018 study by psychologists Elena Stepanova at the University of Southern Mississippi and Michael Strube at Washington University in St. Louis found that a group of white, black, Asian, and Latino college students rated mixed-race faces the most attractive, followed by single-race black faces.

Stepanova wanted to know which of two prevailing theories could better explain this finding: the "averageness" hypothesis, which holds that humans prefer a composite of all faces to any specific face, or the "hybrid vigor" theory, that parents from different genetic backgrounds produce healthier—and possibly more attractive—children.

THE FACES rated most attractive were closest to a 50-50 blend of white and black.

In the study, Stepanova adjusted the features and skin tones of computer-generated faces to create a range of blends, and found that the highest attractiveness ratings went to those that were closest to a 50-50 blend of white and black. These faces had "almost perfectly equal Afrocentric and Eurocentric physiognomy," she says, along with a medium skin tone. Both darker- and lighter-than-average complexions were seen as less attractive.

These results seem to support the theory that we prefer average faces because they correspond most closely to the prototype we carry in our minds: the aggregated memory of what a face should look like. That would help explain why we favor a 50-50 mix of features and skin tones—especially since that doesn't always correspond to a 50-50 mix of genes, Stepanova says. "The genes that are actually expressed can vary," she says.

A 2005 study led by psychologist Craig Roberts at Scotland's University of Stirling, however, supports the hybrid vigor hypothesis—that genetic diversity makes people more attractive by virtue of their "apparent healthiness." The study didn't focus on multiracial people per se, but on people who'd inherited a different gene variant from each parent in a section of DNA that plays a key role in regulating the immune system—as opposed to two copies of the same variant. Men who were heterozygous, with two different versions of these genes, proved to be more attractive to women than those who were homozygous. And while being heterozygous doesn't necessarily mean you're multiracial, having parents of different races makes you much more likely to fall into this category, Roberts says.

Whether these good-looking heterozygotes are actually healthier or just appear so is debatable. Studies have shown that heterozygotes are indeed more resistant to infectious diseases, including Hepatitis B and HIV, and have a lower risk of developing the skin disease psoriasis—significant because healthy skin plays a clear role in attractiveness. But other researchers have been unable to find a correlation between attractiveness and actual health, which may be a testament to the power of modern medicine—especially vaccinations and antibiotics—in helping the less heterozygous among us overcome any genetic susceptibility to illness, Roberts says.

Research vs. Real World

SOME RESEARCHERS have extrapolated even further, suggesting that, along with possible good looks and good health, multiracial people might be genetically gifted in other ways.

Cardiff University psychologist Michael B. Lewis, who led the 2009 U.K. study on attractiveness, argues that the genetic diversity that comes with being mixed race may in fact lead to improved performance in a number of areas. As evidence, he points to the seemingly high representation of multiracial people in the top tiers of professions that require skill, such as Tiger Woods in golf, Halle Berry in acting, Lewis Hamilton in Formula 1 racing, and Barack Obama in politics.

Other researchers argue that this conclusion is an overreach. They counter that genetics doesn't make multiracial people better at golf—or even necessarily better looking. Some studies have found no difference in perceived attractiveness between mixed-race and single-race faces; others have confirmed that a preference for mixed-race faces exists, but have concluded it has more to do with prevailing cultural standards than any genetic predisposition to beauty.

A 2012 study by Jennifer Patrice Sims, a sociologist at the

A DIFFERENT MIX *continued on page 90*

As an actress, **NINA KASSA** (Russian Ethiopian) hasn't always fit into roles neatly; she isn't black or white, just in between. "I wanted a more polished look and tried straightening my hair." But that only made her feel like an imposter. It took her a while, but now, she just doesn't care and embraces her black curls.

A DIFFERENT MIX *continued from page 67*

University of Alabama in Huntsville, found that in general, mixed-race people were perceived as more attractive than people of one race—but not all racial mixes, as would be the case if the cause was genetic diversity alone. (In her research, mixed black-Native Americans and black-Asians were rated the most attractive of all.) The hybrid vigor theory, Sims argues, is based on the false presumption of biologically distinct races. She points instead to evidence that attractiveness is a social construct, heavily dependent on time and place. In the U.S. right now, she says, the biracial beauty stereotype is a dominant narrative.

"Whereas in the past, particularly for women, the stereotypical northern European phenotype of blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale skin was considered the most attractive (think Marilyn Monroe) contemporary beauty standards now value 'tan' skin and wavy-curly hair also (think Beyoncé)," she says.

But saying biracial people are inherently beautiful isn't a harmless compliment—it can contribute to exotification and objectification. For many biracial people, these reports of heightened attractiveness are an unwelcome distraction, obscuring and delegitimizing the true challenges they face. "Even though studies say we're seen as more beautiful, my lived experience negates that," says Ben O'Keefe, a political consultant who has a black father and a white mother. "We're trying to frame it as if we've become a more accepting society, but we haven't. There are still many people who wouldn't be comfortable dating outside their race."

O'Keefe's father wasn't present when he was growing up. Apart from his brother and sister, he was surrounded by white people. His mother raised him to embrace the principle of "color blindness." Since race doesn't matter, she argued, why acknowledge it at all? O'Keefe thought of himself, essentially, as white. When people asked what he was, he said Italian, which is true. He's Italian, Irish, and African American.

But other people's perceptions didn't match his self-image. A store clerk once followed him from aisle to aisle and accused him of shoplifting. While walking one night in his upper-class, predominantly white Florida community, O'Keefe was stopped by police who pulled their guns on him because residents had reported a "suspicious" black teen. When Trayvon Martin was killed nearby under similar circumstances, it triggered an awakening in O'Keefe: "I had always felt more white, but the world didn't see me that way."

The Path Forward

AS MUCH AS O'Keefe wishes that milestones such as Obama's presidency signaled the dawn of a post-racial America, he encounters daily reminders that racism endures. One boy he dated in high school didn't want to bring O'Keefe home to meet his parents. "Oh, they don't know you're gay?" O'Keefe asked. "No, they do," the boy responded. "They'd just freak out if they knew I was dating a black guy."

O'Keefe has encountered discrimination in the black community as well, where others have told him, "You're not really black."

"They see me with light skin and a white family, and that has given me advantages—I recognize that. Their experience, being seen as nothing but black, influences that perception." While he understands the reasoning, it still hurts. "It's saying, 'You're not black enough to be a real black man, but you're black enough to be held up at gunpoint by police,' " he says.

These days, he doesn't get asked, "What are you?" as much as he once did, which could be a sign of progress—or simply a byproduct of moving in more "woke" circles as an adult, he says. But when he does get asked, he identifies as black. "I'm a black man who is multiracial, but it doesn't diminish my identity as a black man."

His mother, too, has abandoned her color-blind approach after coming to see it as unrealistic—and ultimately unhelpful. "We've had some really hard conversations about race," O'Keefe says. "She's embraced that it matters and we need to talk about it, and we can't fix problems if we pretend they don't exist."

The path toward a more egalitarian America will be paved with hard conversations about race, says Gaither, who is multiracial herself. Her research shows that just being around biracial people makes white people less likely to endorse a color-blind ideology—and that color blindness, although well-intentioned, is ultimately harmful to race relations.

In a series of studies published in 2018, Gaither found that the more contact white people had with biracial people, the less they considered themselves color-blind, and the more comfortable they were discussing issues around race that they would otherwise have avoided. This suggests that a growing multiracial population will help shift racial attitudes. But it doesn't mean the transition will be easy.

"If you're in a primarily white environment and multiracial populations are growing, you may find that threatening and look for ways to reaffirm your place in the hierarchy," says the University of Hawaii's Pauker. "As minority populations grow, that's going to be a hard adjustment on both sides."

While there's no population threshold that, once reached, will signal the end of racism in America, being around more multiracial people can at least nudge monoracials to start thinking and talking more about what race really means.

"We are not the solution to race relations, but we cause people to rethink what race may or may not mean to them, which I hope will lead to more open and honest discussions," says Gaither. "The good news is that our attitudes and identities are malleable. Exposing people to those who are different is the best way to promote inclusion—and the side effect is that we can benefit cognitively as well. If we start acknowledging that we all have multiple identities, we can all be more flexible and creative." ■

JENNIFER LATSON *is a science writer and author of the book* The Boy Who Loved Too Much.

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