Review Essay/Essai rendu

Integrating Multiple Identities: Multiracials and Asian-Americans in the United States

Kimberly McClain DaCosta, *Making Multiracials: State, Family, and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, 280pp., $US 21.95 paper (978-0-8047-5546-7), $US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-5545-0).

Pawan Dhingra, *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiple Identities*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, 328 pp., $US 21.95 paper (978-0-8047-5578-8), $US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-5577-1).

As the sociological literature has shifted away from a primordial view of race and ethnicity as fixed identities, research has emphasized not only their fluid and changing nature, but also how individuals maintain and negotiate multiple identities. It was not so long ago that ethnic and — especially — racial identities were seen as *exclusive*: a person could only have one. Today we recognize that people can identify as both White *and* Black, as both Chinese *and* Canadian, or that they can create new identities that combine yet are different from any of their constituent parts (e.g., a "Canadian-Born Chinese" identity that is neither Canadian nor Chinese).

Kimberly McClain DaCosta and Pawan Dhingra both take up the question of how people create and legitimize new identities that blend together different, and sometimes conflicting, cultures or sets of meaning. DaCosta focuses on the construction of "multiracial" as a social category and mode of identification, particularly how the family, marketing, and the state contribute to this construction. Dhingra illustrates how professional second-generation Korean-Americans and Indian-Americans in Dallas live out the hybridity they experience on both sides of their

hyphen. His groups work in the mainstream economy, allowing them to balance their ethnic and American selves. DaCosta's book is ultimately a more satisfying contribution, but both works offer valuable illustrations of how groups resist pressures to sublimate one identity into another, and thereby integrate multiple identities into a more complex whole.

In *Making Multiracials: State, Family and Market in the Redrawing of the Color Line*, DaCosta begins with the 1997 decision of the American Office of Management and Budget, largely as a result of activism by multiracial organizations, to change federal standards for the enumeration of racial data to allow people to mark one or more races on the census. Focusing on the people involved in this movement, she asks why a category of individuals who were largely isolated and invisible to one another came together when they did to assert, and to seek recognition for, the idea of "being mixed." DaCosta draws on qualitative interviews with participants in groups formed for multiracial individuals and their families, as well as fieldwork at organization meetings, events, and other related settings.

Part of her explanation is that this cohort of multiracial people was raised when interracial marriage was legal and they had intimate connections to both sides of their family. It was important to them to express all sides of their identity, which the state's policy to "check only one" race prohibited. Experiences of feeling stigmatized and out of place led them to form multiracial support groups. Advertising and marketing also helped create a putative multiracial group, by identifying and targeting messages at multiracial consumers and emphasizing their distinctiveness as a market segment.

Despite some overlap with other recent works on the multiracial movement, such as those by Kim Williams (2006) and Melissa Nobles (2000), DaCosta makes a distinctive contribution by providing the voices of the people within the movement. She is able to explore the deeper motivations for joining advocacy or campus groups, and to integrate multiple contributing factors, including family dynamics and marketing. The chapter where DaCosta profiles the motivations of four "multiracial entrepreneurs" — the people most active in the movement — is particularly successful in this respect. We know that certain key individuals had an inordinate amount of influence in shaping the movement (Williams 2006).[1] Although the impact of these particular "entrepreneurs" is not detailed, a holistic focus on the role of the individual is certainly apt, and allows DaCosta to capture the complexity of why people identify as they do — including their family dynamics, and their neighbourhood

1. DaCosta reveals that Project RACE, one of the most prominent groups, primarily *was* its founder, Susan Graham.

and school environments (although these influences have been individually described in other works, e.g., Funderberg 1994; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002).

The book would have benefited from a more clearly articulated causal model for DaCosta's explanation of why people came together to assert a multiracial identity when they did. Implied in her claim that this post-*Loving v. Virginia*[2] cohort was raised with intimate connections to both sides of the family is a "why now" argument. Yet she falls short of developing it, perhaps because it is difficult to produce data on how many multiracial individuals had intimate connections to both sides of their families in earlier eras. There are also causal arguments embedded in her focus on both the state and the market, but much of the discussion is about how advertising and state policies spread and perpetuate, rather than create, a multiracial identity. Specifying a causal order for these different components would also have allowed DaCosta to address a seeming contradiction between them: if it is experiences of stigmatization and isolation that, in part, lead people to create supportive organizations (Chapters 4 and 5), then the normalization of those identities in marketing images might be expected to lessen, rather than promote, the motivation for people to come together (Chapter 6). Presumably by the time multiracial groups successfully lobbied for changes to enumeration policies, and demographic information on the "two or more races population" existed for advertising executives to probe, the identity was no longer as stigmatized and pride rather than stigma led to new people joining multiracial groups.

DaCosta's data would have been easier to interpret with more context about the composition of the multiracial movement, both in terms of the racial heritage(s) of the activists and how much of the movement was led by multiracial individuals versus their "monoracial" parents. For example, Williams (2006) argues that a large portion of multiracial activists are in fact white mothers married to black men. DaCosta agrees that the "multiracial community" included the parents of multiracial kids, and those parents comprise one-third of her interview sample. However, she claims that "it was the experiences of multiracial adults … that defined discussions about the content of collective multiracial identity" (p. 127). The respondents she quotes reveal that even people who intermarry may not really understand what it's like to *be* interracial. Given these differences, distinguishing some of the multiracial and monoracial experiences which are blended together throughout the book could give greater clarity to internal differences within that community.

2. *Loving v. Virginia* is the 1967 Supreme Court decision that declared unconstitutional any state laws prohibiting interracial marriage.

The chapter on how marketing helps to create a multiracial group to sell things to, much as Spanish television networks and advertising deliberately promote a Latino identity (Dávila 2001), is a valuable contribution to our understanding of multiracial group formation. Discussions with the respondents about how these images affected their sense of a multiracial group would have added a further layer of meaning to this discussion. DaCosta does include "testimonials" by customers on product websites, illustrating how the products helped consumers realize that they were, in fact, a group with separate consumption needs. Using such material raises ethical issues (e.g., informed consent) as well as validity issues; the quotes resemble advertising copy, and the possibility that company executives edited (or perhaps created?) these words is not raised. Nonetheless, these testimonials are extremely effective in illustrating how marketing and consumer culture not only reflect but shape identities.

In *Managing Multicultural Lives: Asian American Professionals and the Challenge of Multiracial Identities,* Pawan Dhingra examines how people deal with contrasting identities. In this case, the contrasting identities are Indian or Korean and American, but the issues of negotiating an ethnic culture and a receiving culture are relevant for second-generation populations more broadly. Dhingra is particularly interested in "the margins of the mainstream" — people who are connected to yet separated from the mainstream through their economic integration into the primary labour force, and therefore have multiple sets of commitments. He argues that these individuals do not just switch back and forth between discrete contradictory identities in different spaces — an American identity at work and an Asian identity at home. Rather, they integrate their identities in various ways and manage the tensions between them in various locations. As a result, they do not privilege one identity over another (becoming "more American" or remaining "more ethnic"). Part of the reason they are able to do this is because they do not perceive systematic discrimination against them. As economically successful minorities, his respondents attribute any discriminatory experiences to individual ignorance and see themselves facing few structural barriers to success. His choice to focus on professional Indian-Americans and Korean-Americans in Dallas allows him to study these dynamics while at the same time providing much needed data on understudied populations.

Many of Dhingra's theoretical contributions are not really new. The idea that the second generation can acculturate selectively without losing an ethnic or cultural identity is found in Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) work among others, and his discussion of how the well-adjusted "com-

munity" identifiers are distinguished by their social capital and support from a larger ethnic community is reminiscent of Zhou and Bankston's (1998) study of Vietnamese children in New Orleans. What Dhingra calls his "margins-in-the-mainstream perspective" (p. 186) seems less of a theoretical perspective than a description of how Asian-Americans have achieved a measure of socioeconomic integration while their race, as much as their ethnicity, creates barriers to full social acceptance (Tuan 1998, Lee 1996).

Dhingra's observation that Asian-Americans blend their ethnic and American identities in various social spaces, rather than restricting each to different spheres, suggests an important way that these mixed identities are lived in daily life. However, the evidence brought forth to support this argument is not fully convincing. Relatively few examples are given of how respondents integrate their ethnic selves into the mainstream workplace. One example, which Dhingra frequently cites, is James, a Korean-American who wears contact lenses on the weekends but chooses to wear glasses at work to play into American impressions of Asians as smart, hard working, and good at math. Choosing to wear glasses rather than contact lenses is certainly an effort at impression management, but it is hardly the kind of ethnic expression that suggests a true integration of different cultures. James may have ethnicity on his mind when he puts his glasses on in the morning, but it is not his own Asian identity he is expressing. Rather he is accommodating other people's view of what "Korean" might mean. Choosing to use those impressions to his advantage is quite different than feeling able to express his sense of what "Korean" really means to him.

Other examples include people wearing traditional dress to work on occasion or keeping pictures of their families on their desks. Instead of a blending of different cultural identities, what Dhingra is describing is how Asian-Americans who have largely adopted mainstream workplace norms treat their Asian backgrounds like a symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979), selectively choosing when and in what ways to express it. Of course, unlike the white ethnics that Gans described, Asian-Americans are racialized ethnics (Tuan 1998) and their ethnicity is unlikely to be completely hidden. But rather than acting to conceal their ethnicity, their behaviour refers to what Goffman (1963) described as *covering* — trying to make their ethnicity less obtrusive, rather than invisible. Yoshino (2006) argues that with civil rights legislation in place, discrimination is now rarely targeted at members of a social group because of their ethnic or racial status, instead being directed toward those who openly act out their group identities in ways that violate mainstream expectations. Dhingra's respondents, it would seem, have become masters of select-

ive covering — choosing when to downplay their ethnic identities and when to express them symbolically in ways that will not threaten workplace norms. Extending his participant observation into the workplace environment, rather than restricting it to sites of ethnic interaction, might have given Dhingra an opportunity to more fully flesh out the ways that ethnicity is brought into, or withheld from, the workplace sphere.

Social phenomena like intermarriage and immigration make ethnic and racial identities more complex and bring multiple identities together. Dhingra and DaCosta both tackle these challenges while providing quite enjoyable reads. They also identify that what makes ethnic and racial identities socially important is not just how they make us feel but how they shape our opportunities and interactions. Works which emphasize this aspect of identity will continue to move sociological scholarship forward.

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