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LEFT: Jordan Spencer, 18, Grand Prairie, Texas | Self-ID: black/biracial | Census box checked: black. RIGHT: Celeste Seda, 26, Brooklyn, New York | Self-ID: Dominican and Korean | Census boxes checked: Asian/some other race  
Photograph by Martin Schoeller

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## Visualizing Race, Identity and Change

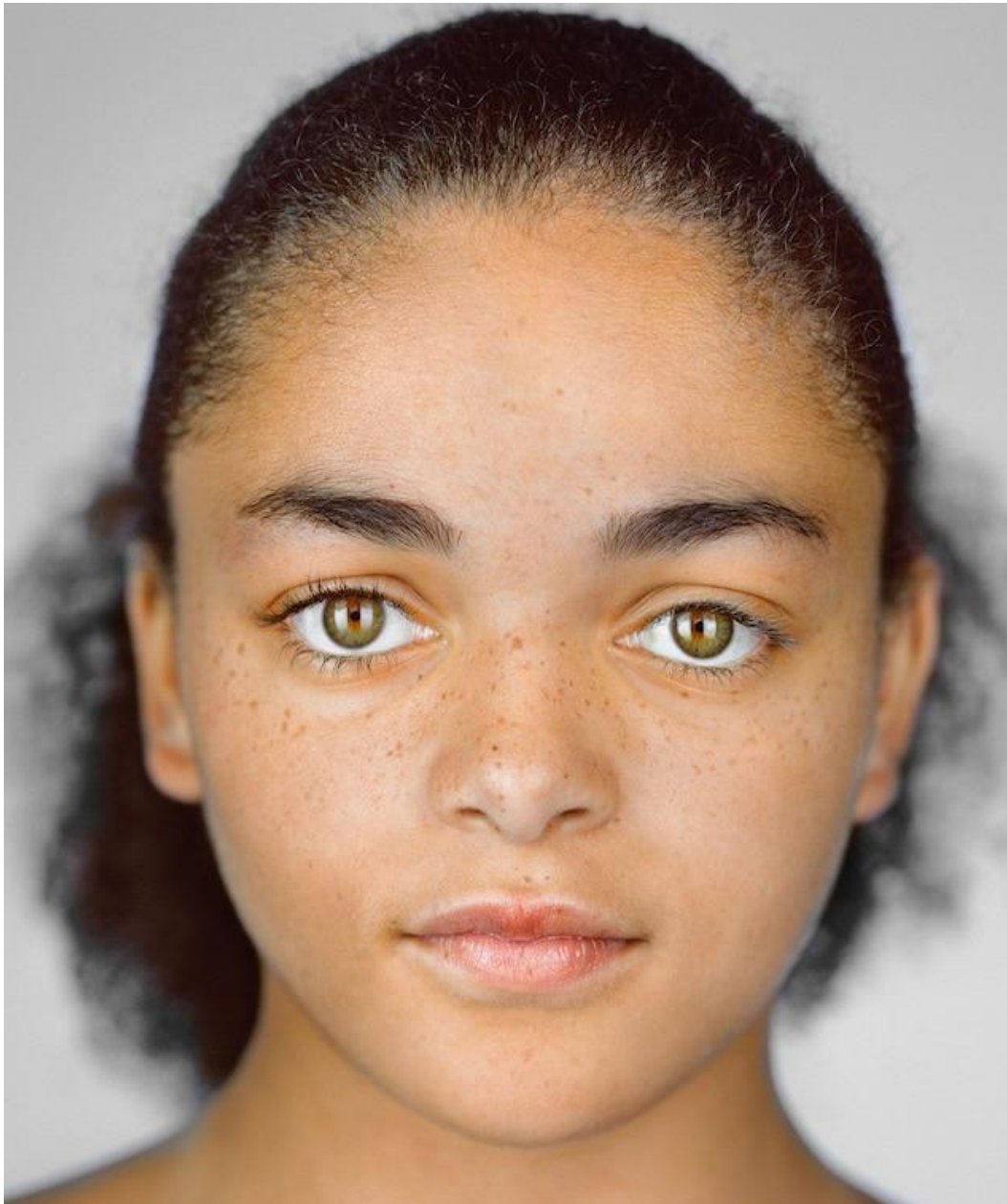
By Michele L. Norris  
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• 13 min read

A feature in *National Geographic*'s October 125th anniversary issue looks at the changing face of America in an article by Lise Funderburg, with portraits of multiracial families by Martin Schoeller, that celebrates the beauty of multiracial diversity and shows the limitations around our current categories when talking about race.

[View the feature story "Changing Faces"](#)

In many ways race is about difference and how those differences are codified through language, categories, boxes, segmentation, and even the implicit sorting that goes on in our heads in terms of the way we label others and even ourselves.

Appearance and identity are most certainly linked when it comes to racial categories, but there is another important ingredient in that stew: Experience. There is no room for that on those official census forms, but when a person picks up a writing instrument to choose which box they check, experience most certainly helps guide their hand.



Imani Cornelius, 13, Shakopee, Minnesota. Self-ID: black and white | Census box checked: black | Imani, who is African American and German, has a bone marrow failure disease called Myelodysplastic Syndrome (MDS). She needs a bone marrow transplant but a short...  
Photograph by Martin Schoeller

David Kung, a math professor in St. Mary's City, Maryland, wrestled for years with what box to check when confronted with official forms. His mother is white. His father is Chinese. His last name speaks of his heritage but it is hard to easily slot him into a single category based on his outward appearance. When he had to fill out those forms, sometimes he would check multiple boxes and let someone else figure out how to handle the confusion. Sometimes he would flip a coin. In that moment he thought of family traditions, songs, food, memories. Marking just one box was agonizing. It meant denying part of his ancestry. When the census forms changed, allowing individuals to choose more than one category, David Kung tore into the envelope, checked multiple boxes, and then sat down and cried.

[\*View David's Race Card Project submission and listen to his story.\*](#)

Official statistics can paint a useful picture. Appearance is an important aspect of the story. But to understand race—and more specifically racial ambiguity—it helps to understand those whose lives are defined by it.

For three years now I have been collecting stories about race and cultural identity on the Race Card Project, and it has provided a window into society like no other I've ever experienced in more than three decades of working as a journalist. The stories I am talking about are short. Very short. Six words long. And it is amazing how much power people can pack into such a small package.

[\*"I am only Asian when it's convenient"—Heather Brown, Seattle, Washington\*](#)

[\*"My mixed background means 'White Enough'"—Maximilian Willson, Olympia, Washington\*](#)

[\*"See a Soul, not a label."—Susan Clementson, Bothell, Washington\*](#)

[\*"Don't cry. Mama loves your curls."—Hilary Roberts-King, Baltimore, Maryland\*](#)

[\*"Afraid children won't look like me"—Alexandria Jones, Columbus, Ohio\*](#)

[\*"My name and skin don't match."—Jennifer Lopez, Salt Lake City, Utah\*](#)

[\*"Lonely life when black look white"—Sandra L. Gross, Inglewood, California\*](#)

[\*"The future belongs to the hybrids."—Skip Mendler, Honesdale, Pennsylvania\*](#)

[\*"I won't disrespect my white mother!"—Sabrina Price Durling, East Windsor, New Jersey\*](#)

[\*"Not 'bi-racial,' not 'mixed,' just human!"—Tyler Brown, Washington, D.C.\*](#)

More amazing is how the exercise, over time, has opened a window for people to share much more than just their six words about who they are and what they are feeling. The submissions that arrive via snail mail, the Internet, and Twitter are often accompanied by comments,

essays, pictures, and artwork. And of the more than 30,000 submissions I have archived, a large percentage, in some way, touch upon multiracial experiences—most specifically marriage, parenting, and the questions of identity for the resulting offspring.

I guess it's not surprising given the trends in interracial marriage. A 2010 Pew Research Study found that interracial marriages in the U.S. reached a record of 4.8 million and have been steadily climbing since those figures were compiled. To put that in context, one of out of every seven new marriages is among people of different racial backgrounds.

For a long time the mere mention of the phrase “race relations” invoked questions about the largely binary, and frequently complicated, dance between black and white Americans (think Sidney Poitier and Katharine Houghton in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* or, more recently, Kerry Washington and Tony Goldwyn in the blockbuster ABC television hit *Scandal*). But today the blurring of the color line is much more stratified and much more diverse.

The Pew study found that among newlyweds in 2010, 36 percent of Asian women married outside their race, compared with 17 percent of Asian men. Pew also found that 26 percent of Hispanics married outside their race, compared with 9 percent of whites and 17 percent of blacks.

But remember, statistics only tell part of that story.

The six-word tales that have poured into the Race Card Project create a portal that allows us to dive beyond the surface into the deeply nuanced issues of racial ambiguity and cultural identity. They are by no means comprehensive. It is not possible to explain every facet of multiracial life. But the six-word stories present a broad mosaic that informs us in these times and will serve as an amazing archive in the future as we try to understand the years when America was steaming toward a majority-minority status.

For many, there are no easy answers—or no fixed answer. Identity is not always a concrete concept but rather something that is situational, or shifting, based on time, place, growth, or circumstance. There are those who are proud of their ability to confidently “code switch” or move easily between cultures, sometimes borrowing the moniker Edgewalkers from Dr. Nina Boyd Krebs, whose book of the same title explores how people form diffuse cultural boundaries in the new Global Frontier.

Edgewalkers are like happy ambassadors who “move between cultural traditions and cultural communities with some level of ease, comfort and enjoyment.” Edgewalkers welcome questions, even when the query is boneheaded or uncomfortable (“*Ooooh, is that your father?*”). They are calm when people stare or ask about their suntans or light eyes. They enjoy confounding people. Humor is always in their toolbox. Patience too. They see these encounters as a chance to chip away at a tortured history.

There are also those who don various identities based on convenience, advantage, or comfort. Erica Shindler Fuller Briggs of North Charleston, South Carolina, is asked the question “What are you?” so often she has started charging people for the answer. “It’s my retirement plan,” she says. “What I charge is determined by timing: At what point in the conversation did they ask the question? If it’s within the first few minutes of the conversation, I charge no less than \$1 per minute, the fee for insult and time wasted catering to shallow character.”

Shindler Fuller Briggs says people are either appalled or entertained. In either case she has made her point, prompting those who seek information about her identity to ask themselves a question: Why is it important? At age 42, she's developed a hard edge around the constant questioning of her identity over time, and for understandable reasons. At one point, a shoe store manager assumed she was Hispanic and fussed at her for not knowing her own language. When she told him she was not Latina, he seemed offended. A corner store clerk refused to believe she was black. "No, you're too pretty to be black," he said.

So how does she answer that oft-asked question, "What are you?" Her answer is found in her six-word submission to the Race Card Project: "What would make you more comfortable?"

[View Erica's Race Card Project submission and read her story.](#)

For some, even that word, what, makes them bristle. As in "What are you?" instead of "Who are you?" or even "How are you?"

Though race is one of those seismic issues—the stuff of movements and monuments and multiday conferences at top universities—the moments revealed in the six-word submissions are smaller in nature and much more intimate:

Brown-skinned mothers who are mistaken as the nannies of their lighter skinned children.

Blue-eyed teenagers who grow outsize afros to win easy (or at least easier) acceptance on the basketball court.

Asians with Irish last names who delight at seeing the faces of potential employers when they show up for job interviews.

And blonde women who understand why their children choose to identify as "Black-tino" out of cultural convenience but quietly die inside because they feel rejected or left out. This is all part of the crazy quilt of America. Our diversity is the marvel of the world and represents one of our greatest strengths as a nation. It heralds progress but not without pain for those who live on the knife-edge of multiple cultures. That will become evident if you spend any time scrolling through the stories that my project, the Race Card, has received.

I've been in journalism long enough to know that people who are exceedingly happy with their lot in life are less likely to share their stories if given the chance. Those who have something to get off their chest are more likely to sidle up to the keyboard. But for a subject as historically and emotionally fraught as this, I am honored that anyone chooses to share their story and that the Race Card Project has become a forum where people can emote but also absorb a bit of life as lived by someone else.

Consider the pain that seeps through the six words submitted by Chad Oiastad of Madison, Wisconsin: "[My grandfather would hate my children.](#)" I visibly seized up the first time I read that. A little shudder went through me just writing it now. But I have seen enough other stories come through the site to know that grandchildren have also had a way of melting away generational bias, or even fear of the unknown, and replacing it with love and pride and fierce protectiveness.

I think of the six words submitted by Phyllis Kedl, of Minneapolis, who could not be more proud of her multiethnic brood that includes fourteen grandkids, only five of whom are ethnically related to Phyllis and her husband. Her six words: [“Family matters; race not at all.”](#)

I applaud Kedl’s outlook and her optimism. I can’t go all the way there with her though. If anything, the Race Card Project has taught me that race often does matter. To insist otherwise is to dismiss the observations, views, and experiences of the thousands of people who have shared their stories with me. Discussions about race have taken on a particular aspirational nuance in that there seems to be this often expressed wish that we could get to some kind of finish line where matters of race would be over ... done with ... a thing of the past.

If you don’t know what I am talking about, think about the phrase “post-racial,” with its suggestion that we could take some kind of express elevator up to the top floor where the view was great, the air was clear, and no one would make you feel icky or uncomfortable. In matters of romance, I have also repeatedly heard the phrase that “the heart perhaps is the last frontier,” with the idea that a rainbow generation would lead us to a promised land where race was at least less prickly than it’s been in the past. Perhaps that day is coming but it surely is not here.

Lessons abound if you take the time to dig. Ali Berlinski offers a dose of simple wisdom. Her six words are a descriptive anthem: [“American Polish Filipina living in Spain.”](#)

What a delicious stew. Or perhaps I should say *estofado* ... or *ilaga* ... or *gulasz*.

In any case, Ali Berlinski says she uses prickly humor to talk about her eclectic upbringing. “Being a biracial kid can be hard, especially when you have a white name and a face that screams ‘I give pedicures.’”

Berlinski embraces her racial ambiguity as a “beautiful mess.”

“My family could very well be the United Nations. Navigating through so many cultures can get messy but it is always oh so rewarding.”

Navigating cultures is something that National Geographic and the Race Card Project have in common, and we want to include you in our journey to better understand the changing face of America. We want to see and hear how you identify yourself in terms of culture, race, or even region. Are you raising mixed race children? Are your parents of different races? Do you have siblings who identify themselves in different ways, even though your biracial background is the same? Are you unsure how to describe a friend, colleague, neighbor, or teammate?

Whatever your story, we want to hear from you. Share your six words and illustrate it with a photo on Twitter or Instagram tagged with #NatGeoRaceCardProject.

*Michele Norris is a host and special correspondent for NPR and the curator of the [Race Card Project](#).*

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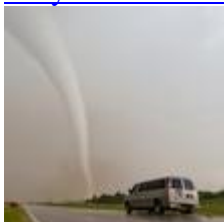


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