# Seeing Me in the Story: Representation of Multiracial Characters in Multimedia

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*In 2015, I discovered Saga, a graphic novel series that chronicles a science fiction story of war, family, and forbidden love. This series resonated with me because it is the first piece of pop culture that I invested in with a leading character whose racial identity is similar to my own. I discovered three multiracial characters in different forms of media set within the United States: Lincoln Clay from the videogame Mafia III, Lara Jean Covey from the movie To All the Boys I've Loved Before, and Miles Morales from Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man. As both a student affairs professional and a multiracial individual, I use current literature on the multiracial experience in the United States and multiracial identity development theories from my field as a lens to analyze these characters and how I see aspects of my identity in their stories.*

*Saga* is a graphic novel series that chronicles a science fiction story of war, family, and forbidden love. This series resonated with me because it was the first piece of pop culture that I invested in with a leading character who has a similar racial identity to me. Hazel, the child of folks from two planets at war, is essentially multiracial; for the past 29 years of my life, I had not seen this identity represented much in popular media. The significant lack of multiracial characters in media is an oppressive action that silences the experience of multiracial people (Root, 1990). My affinity with Hazel inspired me to dive deeper into pop culture to see what has changed for multiracial characters since Root made that reference 28 years ago.

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## The Experience of Multiracial People in the United States

The U.S. has a tumultuous history regarding interracial relationships and multiracial folks. Interracial marriages were illegal in the country until 1967 when the Supreme Court ruled to legalize interracial marriage in *Loving v. Virginia*. Thirty-three years after this ruling, the United States Census Bureau added the option to select two or more racial categories on census surveys. According to the most recent census conducted in 2010, 2.9% of the population identified as being two or more races and this number will certainly increase in the upcoming 2020 Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The multiracial population in the United States is fast-growing, but the exploration of this identity by student affairs researchers is still minimal.

In college environments, multiracial students experience a wide range of harm on campus including feeling the pressure to choose one racial category or feeling invalidated (Museus, 2015). Multiracial microaggressions are generated by a monoracial society that perceives having one race as the norm and views race as an absolute (Chen & Hamilton, 2011; Harris, 2017). The social construction of race and the socialization around race in the United States render multiracial folks invisible to the monoracial population.

Impacts of these microaggressions on the individual include feeling that part of one's identity is being silenced, pressure to choose one racial identity, and continually having to answer the "what are you question" (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012) resulting in racial battle fatigue (Harris, 2017). Multiracial individuals have developed resilience to address the microaggressions and overt racism they experience. Museus (2015) discovered that multiracial college students cope with these situations by educating others, utilizing support networks, embracing identity fluidity, and avoiding conflict. Families play an integral role in the support of multiracial individuals as well. Family support can have a positive influence on a multiracial individual's sense of self which could quell some of the negative effects of microaggressions (Root, 1990; Schlabach, 2013). Whether it is the challenges faced due to multiracial microaggressions or the coping mechanisms used to achieve resiliency, the multiracial experience in the United States is unique. Student development theorists have created a small but influential pocket of multiracial identity development theories in order to address the unique experience of multiracial individuals.

### Multiracial Characters through the Lens of Research

Several theorists asserted that the use of monoracial identity theories is insufficient for understanding multiracial students (Root, 1990), leading to the development of theories that incorporate the voices and perspectives of multiracial people.

Most notably, Renn (2003) developed an Ecological Model for Racial Identity Development specifically for multiracial college students. Renn (2003) used Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model and the person, place, context and time model as the primary sources for developing their model to account for both the process and outcome of development. Renn's study resulted in five identity patterns for multiracial individuals. The first pattern, *two or more,* includes folks who identify individually with each of the races that make up their identity. The *situational* pattern includes individuals who change their racial identification based on the context in which they operate. The *bi- or multiracial* pattern encompasses individuals who claim a single, multiracial identity that meshes together all of their identities. The *one only* pattern includes individuals who identify with only one of the races that make up their identity. Lastly, Renn's (2003) research found a new group of students who chose to opt out of racial categorization altogether.

Rather than identifying solely with one pattern, students tended to align with multiple patterns and their decisions depended on their environments. Renn's theory on multiracial identity development is the framework through which I analyzed the characters represented in this article.

## Character Analysis

Media can affect how folks perceive themselves, both positively and negatively (Schmader, Block, & Lickel, 2015). Seeing or reading about a positive character with a particular racial identity could create a source of affinity for folks of the same racial identity, especially if that identity is marginalized in society.

I connected with Clay, Covey, and Morales. I had heard of these characters before starting this analysis but was unaware that they were multiracial until I researched them. Learning about their racial identity strengthened my connection to the characters. What follows is a brief synopsis of each character's story combined with a synthesis of the perspective of the characters' creators and the multiracial identity research reviewed previously.

### Clay

*Mafia*, a video game franchise, utilizes story arcs similar to well-known films about the Italian Mafia such as *The Godfather*. When creating *Mafia III*, the developers of the game swapped out the traditional Italian mob protagonist for Lincoln Clay, a biracial man of Black and White descent. Webb, a senior writer for *Mafia III,* stated in an interview that he intended the game to be both a "pulpy revenge story and a racially aware period piece" that explored systemic racism in the United States and how that system perpetuated crime (Walker, 2016). Given the time period in which the game is set, Clay has little control over how he expresses

his racial identity. It is unclear whether Clay even knows that he is biracial. Clay never refers to his parents throughout the narrative and, in an argument with an ally late in the story, Clay declares that he is Black. Webb stated that making Clay biracial was important to him as a member of a biracial family himself, but also important to the game's narrative in order to demonstrate the dominance of physical characteristics and phenotype in racial categorization during that time in U.S.history (Walker, 2016).

Clay's experience growing up in a Black neighborhood and being constantly terrorized by racism could have served as a catalyst to promote his connection to his Black identity and push him further from his White identity. Clay's agency of identity was nearly nonexistent due to structural racism, manifested in policies such as the one-drop rule which decreed that any combination of Black and White heritage resulted in that person being perceived as Black. Given the horrible experiences of racism that Clay endured, maybe he felt more comfortable and confident in claiming a monoracial identity. Renn (2003) rejected the idea of linear models in regards to multiracial identity development because multiracial individuals can have a healthy sense of self regardless of how they choose to identify. This idea could serve as a form of resilience in Clay's narrative. Although the context and circumstance in which he grew up erased his multiracial identity, he could still have a healthy sense of self as a monoracial identifying individual.

The writers of *Mafia III*'s narrative purposefully created Clay as a multiracial character in order to display the racial tension of the 1960s and dominance of physical characteristics in racial identification during that time. It was important to me to experience Clay navigating his environment as a multiracial individual. Although my own story is vastly different from Clay's experience, I grew up with folks attempting to racialize me. I became more cognizant of my multiracial identity around the time I began high school. Although all of my close friends acknowledged this part of my identity, several of my other peers were quick to dismiss it. To them, I was what I appeared and what I appear to be based on my skin color is White. There was always the option of presenting family photos in order to prove this claim, but in the end, it did not seem worth the effort to try and convince these folks one way or the other.

**Covey**

*To All the Boys I've Loved Before* is the 2018 film adaptation of a young adult novel by Jenny Han. The narrative centers on Lara Jean Covey, a quiet and nerdy sixteen-year-old high school junior. Covey is biracial—White and Korean. She and her two sisters are raised by their White father after the death of their mother several years prior to the setting of the film. Covey processes her feelings by writing love letters to the boys she likes. Towards the beginning of the story,

these letters which Covey had written in secret are mysteriously mailed out. Once the letters are delivered, Covey navigates the ramifications and eventually begins a relationship with one of the letter recipients. Racial identity is not the focus of Covey's story, but in an interview with Teen Vogue, Han stated that "the book isn't about Lara Jean being Korean-American, but I didn't want readers to forget that it's part of her culture" (Walker, 2017). Furthermore, during an interview with Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show*, Han stated that it was non-negotiable that Covey would be played by an Asian actress because Han never saw this identity portrayed in similar stories when she was growing up (Noah, 2018).

Although it was important to the author that Covey was multiracial, Covey never identified as multiracial herself. However, she appears to be aware of and comfortable with both her White and Korean identities. After of the death of her mother, Covey could have felt separated from her Korean heritage, but her father's efforts to honor that part of her identity and the support she received from her siblings allowed her to develop an appreciation of herself and her identities. The two parts of Covey's racial identity are valued but realized separately, similar to Renn's (2003) *two or more* pattern. In the film, Covey embraces her Korean identity with family, primarily her sisters, and her White identity in school or with her peers.

I can relate to Covey and the *two or more* pattern in my own experience. Being racialized by some of my peers, as previously mentioned, and growing up in a predominantly white area, it oftentimes felt easiest to go with the status quo and embrace what others saw me as. My older sister was actually the one who prompted me to reflect on my multiracial identity more deeply. She was living across the country at the time, so she created a virtual space where the two of us and our father, who is also multiracial, could share our thoughts, questions, experiences, and articles with each other. Similar to Covey in the company of her sisters, this virtual space was a great source for me to build affinity with my family members who share my multiracial identity.

**Morales**

Most people are familiar with the Spider-Man franchise, which tells the story of Peter Parker, a young, White high schooler living in New York who is bitten by a genetically-altered spider. In 2011, Marvel Comic's announced *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*. In the opening pages of the series, Parker is killed while attempting to protect the city. While the city mourns the death of the old Spider-Man, a new one is being born. In Brooklyn, Miles Morales, a thirteen-year-old biracial boy of Black and Puerto Rican descent, is bitten by a genetically altered spider and develops into a mutant with similar arachnid-like powers. Morales has to keep this new identity a secret, especially from his parents who are fiercely divided on

the mutant issue. While his Puerto Rican mother favors mutants, his Black father despises them.

Race is not a central theme of *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*. Brian Michael Bendis, the writer for the series, stated that Morales' story was meant to be his and not necessarily generalizable to folks who hold similar racial identities (Ching, 2013). Axel Alonso, the Editor in Chief of Marvel during the creation of Morales, stated that his aim in creating a multiracial Spider-Man was to bring the series into the 21st century and create a hero that his children, who are multiracial, could see as a role model (Keyes, 2011). Regardless of the team's intentions around Morales's race, the series' impact reached beyond just the traditional Spider-Man audience. Unlike Clay and Covey, who were created specifically for their own roles, Morales was created to replace a White man who had existed in the role for over half a century. I scanned through comments on sites such as Reddit and found expressions of approval and excitement about the transition from Parker to Morales. Intertwined with these positive affirmations, however, were the cries of angry fans claiming that their favorite superhero had been ruined by Marvel's attempt to be politically correct (Ching, 2013; Keyes, 2011). Even if Marvel did not intend to tell a multiracial story in *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, the response of the fan base indicates how some folks feel about introducing multiracial characters into pop culture.

Although Morales' racial identity is not overtly mentioned in the narrative of *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, the story includes relatable metaphors. The cultural debate about mutants with superpowers, manifested in Morales' parents, presented a dilemma for Morales who had to decide whether to claim this new identity as a mutant, potentially pushing his father away and finding more affinity with his mother, or deny this new identity and maintain the status quo in his family. The decision that Morales faces resembles the pressure that multiracial individuals feel to choose one of their races over the other (Poston, 1990). Morales must navigate the world not only as a biracial person but also as a mutant, continuously making choices about how he wants to represent himself to the world versus how he truly feels about who he is.

It is hard for me to pinpoint what pattern Morales aligns with since the graphic novel rarely touches on his racial identity, and much of my analysis relies on metaphor. This metaphor does resonate with me, however, because I have felt at odds with the different parts of my racial identity. When I started my graduate program, I decided that I wanted to approach my identity development by exploring each piece separately. I chose to begin with my White identity since that was often how I was perceived by others, and sought to identify and unpack the privilege that comes with holding this identity. When I shared this plan with a colleague who is also multiracial, they quickly pointed out what I could be losing

out on by taking this segmented view of my identity. Instead, they suggested that I always take my whole identity into account during this time of exploration.

## Seeing Me in the Stories

Clay, Covey, and Morales represent three narratives of the multiracial experience. One theme among these stories is the overlooking of multiracial identities. Clay's situation makes sense considering the historical setting of *Mafia III*, but the decision not to elevate Covey's multiracial identity past tropes and to downplay the importance and generalizability of Morales's multiracial identity feels odd.

Besides the racialization Clay experienced from society, none of the characters in this analysis experienced any of the microaggressions that were identified in the literature review. The narratives of these characters might not embody all of the specific challenges that multiracial folks face, but this may not be a bad thing. The lack of multiracial microaggressions challenges the tendency to tokenize multiracial folks or typecast their existence as individuals who are constantly struggling with the issue of otherness. In fact, the decision to not include multiracial microaggressions might be a source of resilience for multiracial folks to see multiracial characters living their lives at different stages of identity development, engaging in ordinary (and extraordinary) tasks, and not being bombarded by "what are you questions" from others.

Whether they meant to or not, the creators of these characters influenced me through their work. I have been racialized by others and have been told what I was, like Clay. I have found affinity in my racial identity with my older sister, like Covey and her sisters. I have often felt caught in the middle between my two parents, who are different races, like Morales. The creators may not have meant to make these narratives multiracial, but the impact of this multiracial representation on me was vast. More narratives in pop culture should include multiracial characters to bring their stories to the surface. Student affairs professionals should also be considering ways to elevate the research and theories surrounding multiracial identity so that multiracial folks can garner a better understanding of this identity and derive meaning from characters who hold it as well.

One goal I have for myself as I conclude this analysis is to return to *Saga*. I left out Hazel's story because I felt like it would not align well with the context of the United States. I am excited to revisit Hazel's narrative and see what I can learn from something that outwardly seems so different, but in reality feels very familiar.

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