

SHADES OF GRAY

Multiracial people face conflicts in defining themselves

By Nancy Dubinski and Kim Katopodis
THE BATTALION

When it came time to fill out his college application, student affairs administration for higher education, graduate student Rene Guillaume was faced with a difficult decision: Which ethnicity box should he check?

Like many students at Texas A&M, Guillaume is biracial and faces choices like this on a regular basis. When making the choice, he has to ask himself, if he were to choose one box, would he be denying a part of himself?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2.4 percent of the U.S. population (6,826,228 people) is multiracial and 2.5 percent of Texas' population (514,633 people) is multiracial. A study conducted by San Jose State University points out that the Census Bureau counted 65,000 black/white interracial marriages in 1970. By 1989, a 300 percent increase had occurred rendering 218,000 marriages.

Guillaume's mother is a native of Chihuahua, Mexico, while his father was born and raised in Port Au Prince, Haiti. The joining of these two cultures under one roof has been an enriching environment for him to grow up in.

"It's been awesome to have a background in two different cultures. It's allowed me to be more open to others' cultures and to embrace other people's differences," Guillaume said.

Guillaume said he feels fairly connected to both cultures, but especially to that of his mother. Throughout the course of growing up, his family has ensured that he has been well educated about both of their cultures. Music and food native to Mexico and Haiti have a strong presence in the Guillaume household in El Paso and the whole family is fluent in Spanish.

Guillaume's knowledge of the Creole language spoken in Haiti is limited, although he said one of his life's goals is to accompany his father back to Port Au Prince someday and become better acquainted with the language and culture.

In addition to being a part of different cultures, Guillaume's parents are members of separate religions. His mother is Roman Catholic while his father is a Seventh Day Adventist, but Guillaume recalls attending services with his father on Saturdays and being an altar boy in his mother's church on Sunday. Holidays from both cultures are observed in his household.

"It can be a little difficult at times because you feel you have loyalties to both sides and you may have to pick one or the other," Guillaume said.

But, Guillaume is not the only person at A&M who deals with multiracial issues. Sarah Gatson, a professor in the sociology department, shares a black and a white heritage. Her father, who

is black, met her mother, who is white, in a high school in Kansas City, Mo., and they married in 1969 soon after graduation.

Gatson has written an essay entitled "On Being Amorphous: Autoethnography, Genealogy, and a Multiracial Identity" about confronting the racial issues that she has encountered as a multiracial person.

"I think language is important. People can change terminology without changing behavior," Gatson said.

In her essay, Gatson identifies three ways multiracial people categorize themselves: The radical multiracial who argues for a different multiracial category; the radical one-race identifiers; and the amorphous multiracials, those who see themselves connected to different identities but without a separate multiracial category. She said she identifies herself as the third.

"People are uncomfortable about things that are not pinned down," Gatson said. "Identity is a personal choice but it happens with and because of a historical context. You are connected with the past whether you like it or not."

While Guillaume and Gatson's experiences are different, they are both culturally intertwined. Gatson said she feels more closely aligned with the black side of her heritage.

"Identity is a social thing formed in relation to other people," Gatson said.

Growing up in El Paso, racial differences were not as prevalent for Guillaume, but here in College Station, he is more of a minority. So far, during his first semester at A&M, he said he has learned more about himself and his culture than he ever did at home.

Gatson said in her experience, her problems were not from being multiracial but rather from being black. She attended school in Iowa and remembers the first day of classes, encountering a black person and thinking, "Look, another black person in Iowa."

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In 2001, the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) reported that in the 2000 census, 6.8 million people checked more than one race box.

When given a choice, most biracial children will not identify themselves with a single racial group but instead classify themselves as biracial, according to N. J. Nishimura, a counselor and researcher in his 1995 article entitled "Addressing the Needs of Biracial Children."

"I don't feel that there are certain advantages and disadvantages to being biracial," Guillaume said. "I feel fortunate to have been raised in a house with two cultures."

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— Rene Guillaume
student affairs administration
for higher education graduate
student

BATTALION WRITER JEREMY OSBORNE CONTRIBUTED TO THIS ARTICLE
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