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Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies

Title

The Current State of Multiracial Discourse

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Journal

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/C811012861

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The Current State of Multiracial Discourse

MOLLY LITTLEWOOD MCKIBBIN

The story is old. Our testimonies are new.

—Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe, *Scattered Belongings*

Ifekwunigwe's remarks emphasize that multiracialism is not a new topic but that recent conversations are exploring it in new ways. Considering the immense political and social changes that have occurred since the mid-twentieth century, the current discussion of multiracialism is unprecedented in both popular and academic discourses. Certainly the founding of *The Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* signals that multiracialism is a relatively young and burgeoning area of scholarly investigation. The founding of the journal also suggests that critical multiracial studies has become a significant and recognizable interdisciplinary field of study. At present, critical multiracial studies is at an important turning point—a moment when the terms of future discussion are being established.

Rainier Spencer proposes that recent academic work is beginning to ask “hard questions” of multiracial advocacy and of scholars who sympathize with such advocacy, whom he characterizes as “emotion-charged and theory-challenged.” He argues that “we are currently witnessing the beginning stages of [. . .] what Lisa Tessman refers to as ‘mixed-race racial theory,’” most of which, he says, is still overshadowed by “the continued dominance of uncritical popular media coverage.”² He strives to help gear discussion toward “*meta-multiracial theory*” instead of “naïve” and “sentimental” theorizing that he argues still dominates multiracial discourse.³ However, despite his criticism, Spencer recognizes that some scholars are indeed producing constructive “meta-multiracial theory.” Jane Ifekwunigwe identifies similar transformations in multiracial theory in her anthology, *Mixed Race’ Studies: A Reader*, where she describes three “ages” of multiracial discourse. First is the subscription to notions of racial homogeneity, mostly during the nineteenth century, which she terms the “Age of Pathology.” Second is the explosion of late-twentieth-century writing on “mixed race,” in which she includes the foundational scholarship of Maria P. P. Root and Naomi Zack and which she and other scholars term the “Age of Celebration.” Third is the more recent turn-of-the-millennium and twenty-first-century “multiracial” scholarship that deals with complex problems of categorization, structure, and agency in what she terms the “Age of Critique.”⁴ For both Spencer and Ifekwunigwe, multiracial theory is now in a phase of productive criticism. This paper attempts to think through some of the most pressing issues at hand, identify problems that have tended to trip up multiracial discourse, and identify concerns that ought to be addressed in future discourse. It is my hope that this paper will help to assess the current state of the discourse and contribute to the ongoing theorization of multiracialism in this new era of scholarship, particularly as this relates to discussions and constructions of blackness and whiteness.⁵

The changes in scholarship coincide with changes in cultural representations of and public and political conversations about multiracialism. For example, as a scholar of African American literary studies, I have examined how contemporary writers are asserting a new literary tradition that refuses to adhere to conventions (such as the “tragic mulatto/a”) that make race mixing both personally and socially damaging. At the same time, the multiracial movement continues to push for legal, social, and political recognition of multiraciality as something valid. Much as civil rights and black power and over a century's worth of African American writers before them worked to transform the taint of blackness into pride, the multiracial movement (or mixed race movement) and contemporary writers

work to shift the perception of mixedness from destructive marginality to affirmed validity. As Elizabeth Atkins Bowman declares, “We are demanding recognition and respect [. . . by] replacing ‘tragic’ with ‘triumphant,’ and bringing this mulatto taboo out of the closet.”⁶ However, recognition is complicated by a number of political, social, and historical factors and by contentious academic and activist multiracial discourses.

While they may have things in common, a critical difference between post-civil rights black pride and late-century multiracial affirmation is the relationship each has to racial classification. Specifically, black pride and black nationalism employed traditional racial categorization for political unity, whereas the multiracial movement challenges the same racial categories in and of themselves. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hypodescent made it a relatively straightforward task to mobilize black peoples because social and legal blackness was so readily inherited and ascribed. Although discussions about black pride and black nationalism certainly included debate about authenticity, the one-drop rule meant that there was little question of whether one was white or black since blackness could and did include mixed ancestry and all shades of color. The efforts of contemporary multiracial organizations, however, are significantly different and the basis of group unity is considerably less clear. Whereas black nationalism worked for political gains within the existing racial classification system (that is, mobilized all officially “black” peoples), multiracial activists aim to change the classification system itself for a group that has none of the historical, racial, or cultural similarity that brought black people together in racial pride and political solidarity. Though some activists argue for multiraciality as its own category and its own cultural group (based on shared experiences of mixture as the common ground that brings people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds together as a group), it is nonetheless a category that has few of the unifying factors of black pride, such as African American history and hypodescent.

Given that racial identity has always been linked to both phenotype and a history of shared experiences as a race, multiraciality poses a problem as a racial identity because it possesses neither. Or, at least, multiraciality does not exhibit shared phenotype or history as obviously as do existing racial groups (some argue that ambiguous racial appearance and experiences common among multiracials and their families are ingredients for group formation). Without a clearly discernible group, multiracials are faced with the challenge of forming a convincing group and of claiming racial identity as individuals. Lisa Jones queries the tendency among certain multiracial activist groups to consider multiracials a “community” in and of themselves. Jones argues that assuming commonality among multiracial people risks reaffirming monoraces as isolated and singular (or not already diverse) and she objects to the suggestion that having multiple backgrounds creates a new culture of plurality:

Shouldn’t we ask what makes biracial people a community? What holds us together other than a perceived sense of our own difference from the ethnic mainstream? Consider if the Mexican-Samoan kid in San Diego has the same needs as the black-Jewish kid from New York’s Upper West Side? Maybe politically as people of color, but do they share a definitive mixed-race culture? And if they do, should we call it “biraciality” or should we call it “American culture?”⁷

Jones resists the notion of multiracial community because she thinks multiraciality is not distinct from the political community of “people of color” or the heterogeneous culture of the nation. Furthermore, Jones rejects the stance that multiracials share identity and community more among themselves than with monoracial groups, arguing that “by proclaiming specialness aren’t biracials still clinging to the niche of exotic other?”⁸

Indeed, the position of some multiracial advocacy groups (such as Susan Graham's Project RACE) is that multiracial individuals should eschew their monoracial heritages in favor of a multiracial identity that is no longer the sum of its parts but an entirely new identity. But while multiracials might find they have shared experiences and can identify with one another on the basis of mixture (regardless of what kind of mixture), multiracials might as likely find they share experiences and culture with those who identify monoracially. Advocacy groups like Graham's view the shared experiences of multiraciality as conducive to community and identity formation, yet disregard the fact that children are generally socialized by monoracial parents with clear links to monoracial groups. Thus, claims of multiracial community often overlook the connection multiracial children usually have to the racial/cultural/ethnic heritages of their monoracial parents, and ignore multiracials' links to those specific heritages in favor of a generic "multiracial" heritage. The desire for a multiracial label and/or the desire to form a group identity tends to erase the monoracial cultures and histories from which multiracialness originates. The notion that multiraciality produces a group identity continues to be contested. While some argue that multiracial is a specific identity, other multiracials identify with their specific backgrounds, not simply the *fact* of their mixedness.⁹ Multiracials who identify with their specific backgrounds argue that it is not hybridity or mixedness that they recognize *per se*, but rather the racial or ethnic groups of their backgrounds, no matter the number.

Multiraciality is formally recognized by the US government whenever someone chooses more than one race on the census. But since multiraciality is recognized as a diverse combination of races rather than its own race and is seen as a personal choice (that is, whereas blackness was ascribed, multiracialness as a category is chosen), multiraciality is a much less stable political umbrella than blackness. The difference, then, is that where the civil rights movement made claims for all who were considered black, the multiracial movement is challenged with producing an easily identifiable group around which to rally.¹⁰ Proclaiming a multiracial identity is thus complicated by the fact that heterogeneity within multiraciality is much more difficult (if not impossible) to make into a homogeneous identity the way blackness was in the past. Consequently, multiraciality is much more difficult to classify than monoraciality, and multiplicity can be articulated and understood in any number of ways—including monoracially.

The alternative to claiming a multiracial group identity is to articulate an individual identity. This can range from simply selecting more than one box on the census to naming an amalgamation of races (such as Tiger Woods's "Cablinasian").¹¹ Essentially, classification is a matter of what one has to choose from: either one from a list (that may include "multiracial") or one or more from a list (which recognizes multiraciality as *more than one* race rather than *as a* race). The former option offers the apparent safety of recognizable groups but limits people to one group only. The latter offers specific belonging to multiple groups without a single label (or, as in the case of Woods's "Cablinasian," a label for only one person and thus a label unrecognizable in social practice).¹² Many scholars identify the danger of the individualism inherent in multiracial identity, usually citing the threat posed to the socio-political strength and/or protection of non-white groups if multiracials abandon monoracial groups. Frequently, this objection to a multiracial category assumes that multiracials will flee non-white groups for whiteness, which thus conflates multiraciality with whiteness.¹³

While John Powell seems to make such an assumption, he usefully points out the political and moral responsibility involved in identity. According to Powell, while the argument that people should be allowed to identify themselves appeals to "our ideology of individualism," it is dangerous because "we all may be individuals, but none of us are just individuals" and no one can identify in isolation.¹⁴ Eileen Walsh agrees that a too-narrow focus on the individual can end up doing more harm than good. She explains that while monumental legal battles related to interracial marriage and transracial

adoption relied on an individual's right to choose a spouse and to be raised in a loving home, such a focus on individual rights "cannot achieve the systemic elimination of racial hierarchies."¹⁵ Walsh argues that apparent equality within multiracial families (that is, on the level of individuals) often leads to overly optimistic views that social equality across gender, class, and race (that is, on the level of groups) is growing simultaneously.¹⁶ She also argues that "unless the multiracial movement shifts its attention away from asserting the rights of individuals, [. . .] its enduring legacy will be to sustain existing hierarchies, albeit along a color continuum instead of through a fictional race dichotomy."¹⁷ Similarly, Heather Dalmage argues that "white supremacist society will not be challenged by moving the discourse to the level of the individual."¹⁸ Instead, she argues, "we must acknowledge historical contexts, systemic or institutional injustices, and interlocking discourses that perpetuate injustice" by maintaining engagement with historically oppressed racial groups.¹⁹ Indeed, it is a shift toward individual rights and away from the protection of historically oppressed groups that provides the springboard for conservative efforts to abolish affirmative action (they say it discriminates against individuals) and even abolish racial data collection (they say it violates individuals' privacy).

The arguments about the need to recognize the growing practice of identifying with multiple races on the one hand and the need to observe historical oppression against racialized groups and continued white supremacy on the other tend to be polarizing. However, they need not be. Multiracial identity is not always aligned with whiteness against blackness and one can articulate a multiracial identity while maintaining black political solidarity. It is also important to remember that while group identities are critical for maintaining existing race concepts and thus existing civil rights protections, individualized identities have the potential to disrupt the racial ideology that upholds the troubling system of categorization that was built upon and continues to feed racism. Consider, for instance, that the black-white binary homogenizes experiences, but so too does multiraciality as a race/category (that is, as a group identity it homogenizes multiracial experiences). Consequently, individualized multiracial identities pose the greatest challenge to homogenizing, monolithic race concepts. Binary/monoracial and multiracial categories are constructed using the same method (and in this sense, multiracialism as a group identity offers less of a challenge to "race" than some propose). Individual racial identities are just as constructed. If a challenge is being mounted against how race has been and is still used in American society—especially with regard to dichotomous race concepts and the notions of purity and exclusion that accompany monoracialism—then individualizing (multi)racial identities in ways that resist the conventions of group identity may offer a way to question race practices. It is not just multiraciality itself but also how heterogeneous experiences and unique identities are expressed that contributes to political resistance. So while group identities are necessary to combat white supremacy (and thus are still essential tools in US culture), individual identities are necessary to challenge race as a method of classification (and thus begin to change how people in the United States see and treat people). Ultimately, this means that individual racial identities threaten group identities by challenging the basis of group race categorization. But because no rational argument can propose that the U.S. is remotely near ceasing the practice of racist thinking, it means that instead of being seen as a threat to racial political struggle, multiraciality can be viewed as contributing to the discourse on race and racism in the U.S. While group and individual identity formations are two seemingly separate projects in this sense, it is possible to pose a challenge to conventional racial thinking while maintaining civil rights, which seems to be the goal of critical multiracial studies. It is ultimately a question of how—not whether—individual and group multiracial identities are theorized and practiced.

A productive way of working through the consequences of group and individual identity is through the discourse surrounding what multiracialism is and what it does to the practice of race in the United States. In order to understand how multiracial identities might be formed, defined, or

employed, we must understand what such identities are believed to be and do and how it is theorized and debated. In most multiracial discourse, multiraciality is understood to be when a person claims more than one ethno-racial heritage, most often through parents of different groups.²⁰ Multiraciality is also a social acknowledgement of belonging to more than one monoracial group regardless of how one identifies. The opportunity to identify as multiracial arises out of a political history that has brought about an abandonment of enforced hypodescent for the purposes of racial oppression; however, multiracialism must still engage with that history and the continued struggle for racial equality or else risk affirming the racial ideology it purports to challenge. As often as multiracialism is argued to be breaking down racial hierarchies, challenging race categories, and combating discrimination, it is also accused of doing the opposite.

But before evaluating multiracial discourse, we must first consider the language that the conversation employs. Any thorough discussion of race must critique how “race” itself is used as a concept and term. A vigilant critical approach is essential because, while advocates, politicians, and academics alike seem to agree that race is a social rather than a scientific system, biology tends to creep back into the discussion. The incorporation of biological language is often the result of carelessness and a lack of critical thought rather than any genuine proposal that race is biological—or at least locatable as a gene.²¹

Overwhelmingly, race debates consist of two major approaches: one argument is that race is not “real” in a biological sense and that this proposition must inform multiracial discourse, while the other argument is that biology is irrelevant to lived experiences of race and that social race difference needs to be recognized in the interests of social justice and/or historical and cultural use. The problem is that these arguments are made without addressing the essential question of what “race” means and so, generally speaking, many discussions of race proceed without any clarification of how the concept of race is being employed. Joshua Glasgow explains that

the ontology of race [. . .] is often driven by the semantics of race, as the race debate frequently takes this tack: if racial terms purport to refer to natural—specifically, biological—kinds, then race is not real (since there appear to be no biological races); but if racial terms purport to refer to social kinds, then race might be real (on the premise that social kinds can count as real). Thus the race debate hinges on what racial terms purport to refer to.²²

The problem then arises: does a given commentator think of race as a social or biological kind? Does race exist or not exist if considered biological? Does race exist or not exist if considered social? The distinction is not usually evident and the ensuing lack of clarity leads to untidy arguments that seem to suggest that if racial classification is not based on biology, then our discussion of race is unnecessary and we ought not to consider race at all. Because commentators often leave their meaning of “race” unclear, quite frequently they appeal in one instance to biological kinds and in another instance to social kinds without observing that their use of “race” is inconsistent.²³ Ultimately, this means that a significant portion of discourse on racial classification is unclear and therefore not helpful. And because debates about multiracialism rely on such discourse, the central questions of multiracial discourse—whether, how, and why multiracialism might be recognized—are weighed down to a great degree, as we shall see.²⁴

One of the most essential questions of multiracial discourse is what “multiracial” signifies. On its most basic level, multiraciality renders blackness and whiteness (as well as other racial categories) “impure,” in that any race can be claimed in any quantity or manner. That is, multiple races can be claimed simultaneously—a person can be black *and* white where before blackness and whiteness were

mutually exclusive and thus considered “pure” in legal or social terms. However, it is dangerous to consider multiracialness as a new reality as opposed to a new way of thinking about race.

“Race mixing” has always existed and races have never been “pure.” After all, racial categories were developed in an effort to classify and group individuals for particular social and political objectives. While beliefs about what a race consists of have changed over time, diversity within racial categories has not changed. However, defining that diversity usually leads to trouble. Since the racial category of black has historically included any and all racial backgrounds that mix with blackness, many critics propose that multiraciality (as an identity that includes blackness) is unnecessary or redundant.²⁵ However, these critics make the mistake of ignoring the difference between identifying as monoracially black (collapsing multiple racial backgrounds into one racial category) and identifying as multiracially black (explicitly acknowledging blackness as well as other racial heritages).

The problem of conflating multiracialism and blackness is also related to recognizing the social meaning of these race categories. That is, critics habitually debate the *genetic* diversity of the *social* category of blackness. This is a debate exceptionally common among critics, and so it is worth addressing in detail here in the work of a representative scholar. By far the most prolific and frequently cited academic who takes up the problem of biology in discussions of multiracial identification is Rainier Spencer. He observes that the so-called “bi-racial baby boom” of recent decades has produced people no different from the “average Afro-American child (who possesses a significant African, European, and Native American admixture in his or her ancestry).”²⁶ He thus sets out to counter “the notion of post-1967 black/white multiracial persons as being distinct from Afro-Americans.”²⁷ Spencer is concerned that multiracial activists risk re-inscribing conventional notions of race—especially blackness—as something pure, and consequently, as something biological.²⁸ In fact, Spencer is convinced that the multiracial movement is misguided:

Afro-Americans, the most genetically diverse people in the United States, are effectively placed together in a single biological black box in order to provide half the ingredients for creating multiracial children—children who are in fact no more the result of population mixture than they themselves are. Far from dismantling the race concept, it is cemented all the more firmly in place through multiracial ideology and the relentlessly uncritical coverage granted by the popular media.²⁹

The primary problem with Spencer’s analysis is that he uses biological concepts of race while trying to debunk what he views as biological arguments made in support of multiracialism. Recognizing the “purity” of black and white need not rely on biology. The social practice of making everyone fit into monoracial categories has a connection to biology, like everything racial in the United States. But biology was simply invoked (in particular, during the nineteenth century’s period of scientific racism) to prop up the social practice of race, and it is a matter of racial purity on a social level when everyone is relegated to one race and not permitted to identify as multiracial. The fact that mixture has been socially acknowledged in the past (with the “mulatto” caste, for instance) and was replaced with a black-white binary demonstrates the social (rather than entirely biological) construction of race and racial purity. Socially, one had to be white or black; since having black relatives is what designated blackness, people with black-identified ancestors had black identities. Now, black identity is not necessarily ascribed through black relatives and is not necessarily claimed monoracially. Today one’s racial identity can be different from one’s parents’ because the social system of racial identification has changed. Indeed, the scenario of a child of a black parent(s) identifying as multiracial exemplifies

racial identity as a social system, as does the child of two differently racialized parents who chooses to identify monoracially.

Spencer is himself making race biological by claiming that multiracial people are no more genetically diverse than their black parents and by relying on notions of biological mixture to dismiss multiracialness as a social identity. Spencer argues that “the idea of multiracial identity depends absolutely on biological race. There cannot even be a conception of multiracial identity absent the clear and unequivocal acceptance of biological race. After all, we are talking about the biological offspring of (allegedly) differently raced parents.”³⁰ He explains further:

They need nothing else but to be known as the biological children of their socially defined parents in order for the multiracial label to be affixed. Here we see a major inconsistency of multiracial advocacy—what is for the lack of a better term a bait-and-switch—for the racial criterion is thereby switched invalidly from social designation to biology in the cases of supposed first-generation children.³¹

Again, multigenerational multiracial identity undoes his argument—for example, in the case of a child of two black-identified parents who claims multiraciality because of a non-black ancestor or a child of two white-identified parents who claims multiraciality because of a non-white ancestor. Furthermore, Spencer never makes clear how the child’s race is any less social than the parents’. In the case of a child of at least one black parent, the child could choose to identify as monoracially black but could also choose a multiracial identity. That multiracial identity may not have been available as a choice for someone’s parents does not make multiracial identity biological for a new generation, as Spencer seems to argue. Spencer sees black identity as socially derived but fails to see multiracial identity similarly.

However, though Spencer gets caught in the trap of biological concepts of race at times, his concern that biological race is being used as grounds for multiracialness is well founded. It is a concern that is taken up widely among scholars and advocates who voice alarm about the risk of reifying biological race concepts in an effort to distinguish difference for current generations. Susan Graham, the founder and executive director of Project RACE, is a major focus for this concern—in large part because of her high-profile position during Congressional hearings on census reform. As part of her campaign for a “multiracial” category to be added to the census she argues that her children are “half” black, which conveys her belief that her husband’s black identity is racially pure.³² As Jon Michael Spencer and Rainier Spencer both note, her attitude reflects an ironic subscription to hypodescent and monoraciality with regard to her husband and a rejection of both concepts with regard to her children.³³ While her comments could make sense were she to present her husband as black-identified and her children as multiracial-identified (rather than as biologically pure or mixed), her other public statements suggest that she is more than likely relying on a biological framework for her conceptualization of race.

Graham’s “Letters from the Director” on the Project RACE website are characterized by contradictory statements, most frequently concerning the distinction between social and biological race concepts. For instance, in several letters she states that race is socially constructed, argues that multiracial identity is about how one chooses to identify, and insists that racial self-identification ought to be accepted by others. In “Is Obama Multiracial?” she explains that despite his white and black parents, one cannot see him as multiracial if he does not identify himself that way: “Although we could argue that he truly is multiracial, we won’t; we don’t. It’s not how we see him or how anyone else sees him that matters, it’s how *he* sees himself that matters.”³⁴ Yet in “Is this President Obama’s Post-Racial America?” she states that, “we have our first multiracial president, Barack Obama, and even if

he does self-identify as black, he cannot deny DNA.” Similarly, in “The Obama Racial Identity Factor and Saving Multiracial Lives” she argues that “Barack Obama can call himself black, white[,] magenta, green, or whatever he wants, it really does not matter socially. However, genes are genes and his genes are multiracial. Barack Obama has a white mother and a black father, and to categorize him as only one race *medically* is just wrong, inaccurate.” Her evocation of DNA, genes, and medical science demonstrates her explicit appeal to biological race. Her statements would make more sense if she were proposing that *identity* is a matter of personal choice and social practice while *race* is separate and biological, but biology seems to be at the root of her schema.

Similarly, in her “Letters from the Director” that address health care, Graham insists on the need to recognize the genetic difference of multiracial individuals, arguing that they are at risk of under- and over-dosing because drug trials do not determine dosages for multiracial people. She argues that people who identify monoracially (like Obama) are putting multiracial lives at risk because on the genetic level multiracials have different medical needs. While she asserts a genetic difference between multiracials and monoracials in such statements, she also clearly contradicts her interest in self-identification and her proclamations of race as a social construction.³⁵ Graham’s contradictory position is also evident in an anecdote in which a nurse wants to test her child for Sickle Cell Disease because it is common among black populations and Graham objects, arguing that race is far too difficult to determine. It would seem that the nurse is doing precisely what Graham has promoted—the nurse is identifying her daughter’s black “genes” and thus testing her for a disease carried in higher numbers among black people. Yet Graham suddenly abandons her insistence that racial genetics are critical in medical care. Overall, many of Graham’s arguments fall apart because her priority is identifying her children (and all multiracial people) as “multiracial” rather than as a combination of monoraces. She makes the argument that multiracialness is genetic, that Obama is genetically multiracial, and that her children and others seeking medical care need medical care tailored to multiracial biology; yet she is uninterested when the monoracial genetics of her children are used to inform care.

Ultimately, Graham’s inconsistent use of biological and social concepts of race reflects an obvious lack of critical deliberation, which many argue is characteristic of advocacy groups including her own Project RACE.³⁶ Her inconsistencies also appear to indicate that she is more concerned with the multiracial designator than with actually engaging with the issues surrounding racial identity. Her organization’s website states that “Multiracial people should have the option of recognizing *all* of their heritage. ‘Multiracial’ is important so that children have an identity, a correct terminology for who they are. ‘Other’ means different, a label that no person should bear.”³⁷ However, in “The Real World” Graham proposes “the addition of the classification multiracial to the five basic racial and ethnic categories without further breakdown. In other words, multiracial children would only check multiracial and not be forced to list the race and ethnicity of their mothers and fathers.”³⁸ Her priority is self-esteem and a sense of personal validation and belonging for multiracial children, which are certainly important factors for children. But her belief in freedom of choice when it comes to identity and in the celebration of “all heritages” dissolves in the face of her overriding belief in “multiracial” as a racial identity. She is supportive of Tiger Woods’s identification as Cablinasian in another of her director’s letters, “The Problem with the ‘Mixed’ Label,” stating that Cablinasian is “creative and meaningful for him.” However, she immediately reveals her insistent push for one identifier: “For the rest of us, let’s stick with the term *preferred by our community*—‘multiracial.’”

While Graham’s insistence upon “multiracial” as the only acceptable possibility for a racial category is problematic on several fronts, her arguments emphasize the need for recognition of multiplicity in some way. Multicultural theory is founded on the principle of recognition and argues that a lack of recognition is a form of oppression, while critical multiracial studies reflects the notion

that the recognition of mixed race lends feelings of validation and legitimacy to multiracials. How multiraciality is recognized is no simple matter, however, and there are considerable differences of opinion in research on identity regarding how to socialize multiracial children and how multiracial identity ought to be articulated and understood.

Indeed, as the above discussion demonstrates, there is still a lack of agreement regarding what multiraciality is considered to be. In thinking about what multiraciality is, and in working through the concept of multiplicity in racial identity, it is also helpful to consider what multiracial identity is believed to do to, or what purpose it serves in, the social practice of race.

Early scholarship and ongoing advocacy have made claims about how multiraciality will bring about the breakdown of race. For instance, foundational scholar Naomi Zack argues that “the facts of racial mixture, namely the existence of individuals of mixed race, undermine the very notion of race, which presupposes racial ‘purity.’”³⁹ Elsewhere she argues that “if individuals of mixed race are granted a separate racial identity, then all of the myths of racial purity and stability break down because there is then such a large universe of possible races that the historical contingency of any group’s racial identity becomes transparent.”⁴⁰ However, the “fact” of mixture does not inevitably challenge racial purity as Zack’s comments suggest. Creating a “separate racial identity” does not challenge existing race concepts because, as Rainier Spencer points out, it will simply “reify explicitly those other racial categories on which it necessarily would depend for its own existence.”⁴¹ Or, as Naomi Pabst argues, “it risks reinscribing the very modes of classification it seeks to critique by establishing an additional category of belonging with its own dominant narratives, its own questions of belonging, its own issues of authenticity and essentialism, and its own policings and regulations” just like existing categories.⁴² Indeed, the appeal to mixture as a threat to race or racial purity is not as straightforward as Zack would argue. Racial purity is not necessarily threatened by race mixture—particularly when mixture is recognized as a separate racial category. Black and white can be pure while black-white (whether called “mulatto” or “multiracial”—or “gray” as Zack proposes) poses no threat to the ideas of pure monoracial categories.

Indeed, mixture does not automatically challenge beliefs about what monoracial categories are or mean. But if multiracial identity is understood as belonging to more than one monoracial category as opposed to being its own race, then it can begin to challenge beliefs about monoracial categories if they are assumed to be incapable of blending in one identity (instead of one body). That is, a claim of both blackness and whiteness as separate racial groups begins to challenge the purity of both monoracial categories, whereas claiming blackness and whiteness as a new race (in some formulation of multiraciality) does not. After all, racial mixture does not necessarily dissolve ideas about distinct races or pure races. To borrow Spencer’s use of color as an analogy, green does not make yellow or blue disappear. The only thing green really challenges is a belief that yellow and blue cannot be mixed. It only makes sense to claim that multiraciality challenges existing race concepts if it is believed that the races cannot be crossed—and this would seem a rather groundless charge to make since even white supremacists have argued for centuries that mixture is an abomination, not that it is impossible. Rather, it is in racial identities claiming to belong to multiple monoracial groups that beliefs about those monoracial groups might potentially break down. Since blackness and whiteness has always equalled blackness and not-whiteness, black-and-white confounds the understanding of blackness as mixed and whiteness as unmixed.

A major problem when considering whether multiracialism has the capacity to begin to challenge the practice of race itself is, as the above discussion suggests, whether multiracialism is conceived of as a separate race category or as a different sort of racial concept. Many scholars express grave concern that a multiracial category risks reifying racial categories and reinforcing the practice of classification. For instance, Heather Dalmage argues, “a multiracial category and an officially

recognized community would create greater divisions, and society would not necessarily be pushed to think more critically about race and racial identities. Whites could just recategorize this group of racially mixed people and, with calm certainty, once again see themselves as superior.”⁴³ Similarly, Abby Ferber argues that “an analysis of the construction of race and white supremacy reveals that the multiracial movement’s revolutionary potential lies in its threat to racial essentialism. Attempts to reify multiracial identity as simply another racial identity classification will neutralize that threat and instead contribute to maintaining the hierarchical classificatory system.”⁴⁴ And as Rainier Spencer argues, “the practical price of establishing a multiracial category would be the loss of all the corrosive, subversive, theoretical energy inherent in the multiracial idea—resulting in what, in other venues, has been called collaboration or co-optation.”⁴⁵ Though Spencer distinguishes between theoretical and practical applications of multiracialism and thus does not subscribe to the official recognition of multiracialness in any form, his comment reflects the concerns of a great deal of multiracial discourse: namely, that multiracialism has a distinct potential for disrupting, challenging, and perhaps revolutionizing the practice of race in the U.S., but that whether such potential is achieved depends on how the U.S. goes about recognizing multiracialness and how multiracials go about articulating their identities. Susan Graham’s call for “correct” labels subscribes to the idea that official classification is somehow accurate and that multiracialness deserves as accurate a label as monoracial categories. Consequently, she implies (in opposition to her own explicit predictions) that multiraciality poses no threat to existing systems of classification or existing racial categories.

Dalmage’s, Ferber’s, and Spencer’s comments suggest that multiracial identity must be conceived of in a new or contrary way rather than simply fitting itself into current practice if it is going to trouble the way race is considered in the United States. As these scholars have observed, conceptions of multiraciality as a racial category on par with monoracial categories duplicate the thinking behind the monoracial categories rather than challenge them. The conception of multiracialism as a race reproduces historical scenarios in which mixture was observed as its own race without posing a threat to the white supremacist racial hierarchy or existing beliefs about whiteness or blackness. In fact, many skeptics of the multiracial movement worry that (once again) recognizing mixture risks a return to the color hierarchies of the nineteenth century. For instance, Suzanne Bost is skeptical of scholars like Maria P. P. Root who posit that multiracialism combats the racism involved in keeping up the color line. Bost worries that such attitudes risk repeating the historical fascination with mixture which has always led back to binary thinking and white supremacy.⁴⁶ Mary Texeira claims that “the mixed-blood category under discussion is merely the mulatto, quadroon, mestizo, and so on in a new guise,”⁴⁷ while Naomi Pabst observes:

If American racial pathologies remained deeply entrenched when “mulatto” was on the U.S. census pre-1920, I wonder why so many hopes are being pinned on a multiracial census category now. And looking at the Caribbean and South Africa, it becomes equally clear that formalizing a hierarchical tier for mulattoes, “half-castes,” “colored,” or “grays” does nothing whatsoever to undermine dichotomous systems of domination, whether ideological or institutional.⁴⁸

What Texeira and Pabst identify is a need for a shift in ideology rather than the production of new racial labels. Ultimately, what is essential for a growing number of multiracial theorists is to approach multiraciality differently than in the past. For example, G. Reginald Daniel argues that we must shift our understanding away from Eurocentric and radical Afrocentric understandings of race that reinforce dichotomous race concepts and “static” race identities. A new critical understanding of multiracialism, he argues, could “potentially forge more inclusive constructions of blackness (and

whiteness)” which could, in turn, “provide the basis for new and varied forms of bonding and integration” and better reflect the wide set of variables that shape identity.⁴⁹ If we understand the past and avoid duplicating its mistakes, then we can allow the past to inform current and future theorization of multiracial identity. Such a critical examination of multiracial identity has the potential to work toward broader goals of equality and perhaps, eventually, a just society that no longer needs or uses race.

However, this critical approach is not taken up by a significant number of multiracial advocacy groups and politicians. There is a considerable amount of advocacy that argues that because of racism, inequality, and the personal implications of racial identity, race should cease to be the guiding method by which Americans are categorized.⁵⁰ These “color-blind” advocates proclaim to be working to free US society of its racist and racialist past. However, the way in which they plan to go about it is highly problematic since they call for an abolition of officially recognized race rather than progress toward social equality. Given that the abolitionist strategy is based on policy reform rather than social justice, it would remove the racial structure in society without removing the racial ideology behind it—which is why abolitionists’ sentiments pose such a threat to racial equality efforts. Indeed, right now the prospect of multiracialism “undoing” conventional race concepts should be considered the demolition of the subscription to hypodescent, *not* the demolition of beliefs about race as a social system of categories.⁵¹ Some theorists posit that much abolitionist advocacy originates with well-meaning yet misguided white parents (usually mothers).⁵² The argument is that these parents simply have an unrealistic assessment of race and racial relations in the U.S. and consider a color-blind or raceless society the best thing for their multiracial children or, in some cases, an easier solution than taking on the complex history and politics of racial identity.⁵³ But, as John Powell points out, the problem with the color-blind stance is “in assuming that the major race problem in our society is race itself, rather than racism” and so efforts are misdirected in a way that is ultimately more damaging than helpful.⁵⁴

Recent conservative initiatives signal the very real possibility that abolitionist arguments can gain traction in public and political discourses and affect social policies. During the census debates of the 1990s, Republicans (most notably Newt Gingrich) supported a multiracial category because it would mean that social support as well as legal protection for non-white groups could be suspended in a “color-blind” society. As some liberals argue, the “deliberate nonrecognition of race erodes the ability to recognize and name racism and to argue for such policies as affirmative action, which rely on racial categories to overturn rather than to enforce oppression.”⁵⁵ In California, Ward Connerly proposed a state bill that would eliminate “racial identity” by making it illegal for the government to ask for such information. His “Racial Privacy Initiative” was geared toward doing away with affirmative action, which his colleagues at Adversity.net describe as “‘racial preference discrimination’ (i.e., *reverse discrimination**)!” The website for Connerly’s own organization—the American Civil Rights Institute—explains, “the days of racial set-asides are over. Citizens demand their government treat each of us fairly and equally regardless of race, ethnicity, color, gender, or national origin.” Both Gingrich and Connerly strategically aligned themselves publicly with multiracial advocates who were lobbying for the official recognition and collection of data on multiracials, particularly in terms of a separate multiracial category. This conservative support suggests that multiracial identity may be—or is being—appropriated for an attack against civil rights efforts and anti-racist initiatives. Moreover, with efforts like these, conservatives undermine their own claims that multiracial identification is a step towards equality or the natural evolution of civil rights.

The desire for a color-blind or raceless society may be well intentioned, but the prolific scholarship that evaluates and condemns color-blindness serves to illustrate the necessity of maintaining an agenda of social equality within multiracial activism.⁵⁶ Scholars use the opportunity of

critiquing color-blind initiatives to reaffirm the necessity of formulating multiracial discourse in tandem with, rather than in isolation from, issues of social justice. Eileen Walsh explains it well:

If the Multiracial Movement is to succeed in eliminating race and the racial hierarchy, it must adopt and promote an antiracist, social justice agenda. Disappearing race from the vocabularies and consciousness of academics, policy makers, and the citizenry prior to dismantling the structures of inequality that persist not only puts the cart before the horse, it also serves to render white privilege invisible—a most dangerous proposition with a long legacy. Ignoring the ways in which race has been constructed as an essence, as well as marker for white group privilege, allows the mischief of race to remain hidden insidiously in our institutions while individuals, distracted from ferreting out injustice, delight in the belief that color no longer matters.⁵⁷

The scholarship that takes color-blind activism to task emphasizes the difference between approaching multiracialism as an issue of anti-racist political awareness and progressive political engagement, and offering an ahistorical treatment of multiracialism as an elimination of race and racism through color-blindness.

However, progressive political engagement is not entirely straightforward either. While the right is working to eliminate the official recognition of race and thus discard hard-won civil rights protections, some members of the left are working to maintain the status quo in the interest of civil rights but at the cost of multiracial identity. For many minority rights organizations, civil rights can best be protected through exclusively monoracial identity, and for this reason they often view multiracialism as both an ideological and a political threat to black solidarity. Some monoracialists accuse multiracial “race traitors” of being anti-black and abandoning blackness for the benefits of whiteness. This hostile rhetoric is certainly not characteristic of most civil rights groups and activists. However, some scholars do approach the issue by arguing that blackness has always absorbed mixture and therefore that multiracial identity is redundant and ought to be discarded in the interest of black solidarity. The possibility of multiracial identity co-existing with black solidarity is not discussed. Instead, political loyalty is aligned with racial identity, and in this instance multiracial is not black. In the same way that ahistorical treatments of multiracial identity ignore black history and the continuing legacy of white supremacy in contemporary US race practices, attacks on multiracial identity as a wholesale abandonment of blackness ignore the changes in US society that might permit an articulation of multiracial identity in new ways. That is, the historical practice of race “passing” usually required that blackness be discarded in favor of whiteness, and mulatto classes did fit into the white supremacist color hierarchy. However, the US social context is very different now than it was then. Colorism--the discriminatory privileging of light skin color over dark--has survived well in the contemporary United States. Yet multiracial identity is not necessarily tied to the claiming of white privilege and the betrayal of blackness as it was in the past. As Naomi Pabst argues,

Mixedness is cast as—among other things—inauthentic, irrelevant, tragic, and a site of unmitigated privilege within blackness. All of these assumptions serve to curtail a serious treatment of interraciality and the taking seriously of mixed-race subjectivity, and as such, they reify long-standing taboos around mixed-race subjectivity as a social location and as a site for critical excavation. Even the fact that this topic is so often met with loud proclamations of the inherent blackness of mixedness or the inherent mixedness of blackness effectively paralyzes further, more probing discussion of mixedness and blackness as converging, coconstituting signs.⁵⁸

The declaration that “everybody is mixed” is problematic because it does not take into account differences that have occurred over time. As insightful recent work on figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larsen emphasizes, it is essential to consider the very real and complex implications of the socio-historical moment on (multi)racial identity.⁵⁹

Kimberley DaCosta also recognizes that the critics who suggest that “mixedness is mixedness” regardless of social context are ignoring the changes that have occurred up to and including the contemporary moment: “in referencing the tangled genealogies of blacks and whites decades and generations removed, these critics treated racial mixedness as an entity whose meaning is the same regardless of historical change, social context, or individual experience.”⁶⁰ And as Pabst further argues, the implication of the mixed-is-black argument is a refusal to engage in discussion or thought regarding racial identities. She states that it is

a silencing device. It is often put out there in order to curtail further discussion about interraciality, as if nothing else of significance can or should be said about it. Some people, especially academics, seem to think that the only valid thing to be said about racial mixing is that “everybody is mixed.” Proclamations of universal mixedness can be helpful as they debunk “purity,” removing the stigma of being mixed and also in emphasizing, rightly, that the phenomenon of hybridity is widespread. But on the other hand, this emphasis takes the salience and the meaning out of mixed race matters. [. . .] To say that everybody is mixed overstates the similarity among people. This in turn prevents us from being able to talk about what makes us who we are and the differences between us that make a difference.⁶¹

The urgency with which critics work to defend blackness against the possible threat that multiracialism (as it has traditionally been recognized) might pose is understandable; however, their opposition valorizes single-minded protection of existing systems of civil rights enforcement and ignores new propositions. As Kim Williams explains, the rapid decline of blackness as the majority minority has more to do with immigration trends than with multiracialism.⁶² Thus, the dogged maintenance of protections that were set up in the 1950s and 1960s when the US racial makeup was very different, and a general defence of civil rights through a discourse of population or monoracial classification alone, are likely not going to be sustainable regardless of whether multiracial identity is ever acknowledged. In any case, the potential threat of multiraciality to civil rights is not a threat of multiraciality but a threat of how that racial construction is used—for instance, whether multiracial identity is an acknowledgement of black and white ancestry or whether it is being used to argue for an end to African American identity. Ultimately, just as commentators must ensure that their activism and arguments maintain and further social justice struggle, they must also ensure that their efforts for social justice do not exclude the possibility of a simultaneous articulation of multiracial identity.

As this discussion demonstrates, a critical approach both vigilant and open-minded is vital for working through issues of multiracial identity. Much as the oppressive one-drop rule was embraced by African Americans and turned to their advantage in demanding civil rights, multiraciality might easily be shaped into something that multiracial activists and scholars may have never intended. For some, the risks outweigh the potential benefits; for others, the risks must be taken to begin overhauling the way Americans understand race. However, it is becoming clear that US society will have to deal in some fashion with a growing number of people in the United States who want to identify multiracially. The issue at the heart of the demand for multiracial recognition is how (and perhaps whether) the recognition of multiraciality on an official level will translate into recognition

on an ideological level. While multiracial activism tends to focus on political change and official classification issues, the abundance of personal narratives by multiracial people suggests that the social perception of race is a primary site of concern.⁶³ Official classification and the social perception of race shape and are shaped by one another; for both, a major challenge is the deep-rootedness of monoracialism in US racial practice on every level. And having identity recognized and understood is a multi-faceted yet essential challenge.

While racial classification in the United States has relied on self-identification since the 1960s and multiraciality has been an option since the 2000 census (via the “choose one or more” option), there is a difference between official race classification and the social practice of race. This difference is not a contemporary issue: for those who “passed” as white in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, the difference between how they were classified (as black) and recognized (as white) troubled white supremacist society immeasurably. The difference between the current situation and historical situations is that racial “passing” depended on appearance to guide social perceptions of race. (That is, black-looking people could rarely “pass” unless they could convince others that certain physical attributes were non-“Negro.”) Contemporarily, individuals are ostensibly given the choice of how to identify themselves regardless of appearance. But whether the public will accept whatever identity one proclaims is another question. A paradigm shift has to occur for society to accept how a person chooses to identify racially rather than ascribing race according to social perception or existing group identities. Individuals with similar ancestral backgrounds might well identify differently depending on childhood experience, the makeup of their families, the attitudes of their parents, their locations, their friends and social circumstances, their political persuasions, and so on. Even siblings might identify differently despite being socialized similarly. Potentially, the way a multiracial subject wants to identify may not be recognized or respected in the general public or even by other multiracial people. Despite the government’s continual revision of the census and reliance on self-identification, it nevertheless remains unclear to what extent the state will recognize multiracial identities. Yet change is certainly possible and modifications to the observation of race both legally and socially have occurred throughout American history. How multiraciality might affect social or political change and what it is that might be changed are the central questions in advocacy and scholarship.

Recent African American literary production has tended to focus on a relatively narrow slice of multiracialism, often depicting educated, monoracially identified, middle-class, heterosexual parents who have biological children within marriage. Certainly issues of class, education, nationality, multiracialism, multiculturalism, non-biological families, non-heterosexual families, and single or group parenting, among others, will affect (multi)racial identity. Scholars are already calling for attention to be paid to same-sex parents (who may or may not have biological links to their children). Other scenarios are likely to arise as well, such as step-parenting; multiracial identification that arises from ancestral rather than parental racial identity; people who adopt children of different races but raise them to identify as the adoptive family’s race(s); immigrant parents who have not been socialized to perceive race the way their American children will (and whose children might self-identify in ways entirely foreign to them); and other situations in which racial identity might have nothing to do with ancestry or “blood” but rather with family, culture, or politics. Recognizing the need to think about racial identity beyond heteronormative nuclear families is also a recognition of the complexity of modern social behavior. New generations are being raised with an awareness of non-normative sex, gender, sexuality, nationality, and race and they consequently come to consider identity of any kind to be more flexible and transitory than had earlier generations.

Lastly, we must be diligent in considering multiracialism that includes or excludes whiteness. The majority of cultural production and scholarship deals with whiteness and non-whiteness—only a

fraction includes or even focuses on multiracialism without whiteness (and the very different racial discourse of non-white multicultural/multiethnic/multiracial families). More scholarship is needed to think through the complex issues of multiracialism among races “of color.” But critical multiracial studies must also be vigilant to address whiteness directly and engage with critical white studies. Whiteness can easily be lost in discussions of race and racialization but in order to theorize race, whiteness must be considered in the same terms as any other race. Acknowledging the whiteness in blackness is useful, for instance, but in relation to multiracial theory, race mixing cannot be an issue relegated to blackness alone. Ultimately, if multiraciality or blackness is not considered in relation to and as affecting whiteness, but is instead considered an issue of one’s relatedness to or understanding of blackness, whiteness remains unaltered. While recognizing diaspora and hybridity in blackness is indeed of critical importance for the future of racial discourse as Naomi Pabst insists, and if it is done in such a way that it simply reaffirms black (pan-)nationalism, then it will, as Rainier Spencer warns repeatedly, simultaneously reaffirm whiteness as monolithic. Whiteness, then, must be included in the reorganization of blackness in racial theory. Spencer argues that the “essential barometer of whether race is breaking down in the United States is the status of racial whiteness” and thus alerts us to the need to maintain as critical an eye on whiteness as on other races.⁶⁴ While there may be a need to discuss blackness in more complex ways than whiteness, such discussion will be limited so long as whiteness is not examined with similar vigor.

Whiteness is under intense scrutiny. But as white studies scholars themselves warn, whiteness must not be considered in isolation. For racial identity to be able to cross racial borders—in particular, those of whiteness—identification must be theorized beyond “blood” or phenotype. As already noted, other factors that contribute to how someone identifies apart from a biological sense of race offer critical opportunities for analysis. Sociologists are already beginning to examine white parents of multiracial children and the ways in which their racial identities shift because of changes to their immediate community and socio-political consciousnesses.⁶⁵ Such sociological studies also suggest that whites who intermarry and have children with blacks are also identified differently by others, who see them within the context of their interracial and multiracial families. Theorization of racial identification will have to broaden discussion beyond biology and inheritance to include culture explicitly. Choice will also have to expand from the “honoring both parents” discourse of multiracialism toward a broader consideration of race in relation to family, community, and culture.

As Jayne Ifekwunigwe’s comment in this paper’s epigraph points out, the story of mixed race is not new but contemporary experiences and representations of mixed race are. Part of the writing and theorizing of multiracialism, then, is a departure from previous depictions of mixture and an effort, in fact, to re-imagine (mixed) race identities for new generations. Multiracial identity is imagined in relation to history but in ways that attempt to move beyond that history and discard some of its limitations. This is a new political, social, and literary moment in which racial identity is capable of transforming. Though race is characterized by transformation in US history, the change offered by the twenty-first century marks the first major step since the civil rights movement in revolutionizing US race concepts.

NOTES

¹ R. Spencer, "Assessing Multiracial Identity," 358.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 360–61.

⁴ Ifekwunigwe, *Mixed Race Studies*, 8.

⁵ I will use the term "multiracial" instead of "mixed race" and will employ the term "monoracial" (which refers to singular conventional racial categories) in contradistinction to "multiracial." Also, because of the nature of my work, my discussion will focus largely on black-white multiracialism; this focus should not be taken to suggest that black-white multiracialism should dominate multiracial discourse—indeed, it should not—but merely reflects my research area.

⁶ Bowman, "Black Like Who?," 24.

⁷ Jones, *Bulletproof Diva*, 60–1.

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ While many wish to assert belonging to *more than one* ethno-racial group, others advocate that multiracialness be recognized as a *separate racial category*. The testimony of AMEA and Project RACE leaders before Congress and Erica Childs's study of online multiracial communities in "Multirace.com: Multiracial Cyberspace" reveals that many prominent voices advocate multiraciality as a race. That is, these activists identify (or advocate identification) as multiracial and do not identify (or advocate identification) with multiple conventional races. Some advocacy groups, such as Project RACE, lobby for a stand-alone multiracial option on state forms, including those for schools, specifically to provide children with a sense of belonging and validity. Project RACE's efforts have met with some success as several states have added a multiracial category to government forms.

¹⁰ Because of the lobby for a "multiracial" category, the political effects of changing the census continue to be debated. Before the changes were made to the 2000 census, many voiced concern that a multiracial category would deny the legal and political protection of minorities as well as the possibility of political mobilization and solidarity of ethnic or racial groups. This problem appears to have been solved by the "choose one or more" format and lack of a multiracial category; however, lobbying continues for a multiracial option with success on local and state levels to date. The changes mean that Americans must still work within the state's classification system in that they must choose a category that the state deems valid or deal with the often troubling issues surrounding the fill-in-the-blank "other" option. But the changes also maintain the protection that minority groups had under the former census because all minority selections are counted as such. For instance, if a person checks both "black" and "white," they are counted as "black" with regard to any civil rights protections or programs that require census information.

It should also be acknowledged that the debate surrounding whether or not multiracial individuals form a group is part of the legal argument used by some activist groups. If multiracials are an identifiable group, then the same arguments can be used for their rights as were used for African Americans' during the Civil Rights Movement. For a discussion of the legal strategies of some multiracial organizations, see Kimberly DaCosta's "Multiracial Identity: From Personal Problem to Public Issue."

¹¹ Woods created this label to identify his white (Caucasian), black, aboriginal (Indian), and Asian heritages.

¹² For instance, in "Deconstructing Tiger Woods: The Promise and the Pitfalls of Mutiracial Identity," Kerry Ann Rockquemore argues that Woods can assert his individualized Cablinasian identity as his own personal identity. But, she points out, his label is known only because of his fame, and that without his fame his label would not be known, accepted, or used by others around him.

¹³ While some multiracial activists desire group recognition, such recognition could well come at the cost of existing groups. If multiracials are recognized exclusively as a group, choosing "multiracial" will indeed remove a person from all monoracial categories. This effect leads to polarizing views. Some argue that a multiracial label is important for self-esteem and thus advocate for a multiracial category rather than "choose one or more" or "other" options (that is, group formation should be used to the benefit of individuals' personal needs). Others argue that adding "multiracial" to a "choose one or more" option serves no purpose for civil rights monitoring of historically oppressed groups (that is, group identity should serve the purpose of rooting out discrimination on the basis of that identity). The issue is more complicated than either stance allows, and will be discussed in more detail below.

¹⁴ Powell, "The Colorblind Multiracial Dilemma," 147.

¹⁵ Walsh, "Ideology of the Multiracial Movement," 220.

¹⁶ Ibid., 231.

¹⁷ Ibid., 220.

¹⁸ Dalmage, *The Politics of Multiracialism*, 176.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Because the discourse I am discussing deals with the scenario of two differently raced monoracially identified biological parents who co-raise their children, this is what I will address in this discussion. The otherwise very intricate and complicated nature of family and socialization is also something that multiracial theory needs to address more directly.

²¹ While race is not biological in the sense that there is no gene for race and no way to discern racial makeup at such a level, the general overall understanding of race has to do with biology in that there are shared traits within inbred populations. Indeed, many point out that certain populations contain high rates of particular diseases and conditions and so "racial" ancestry from one of these populations ought to be considered reason to be tested for such inherited medical conditions. However, since the genes for disease have to do with geography rather than modern race concepts, and since these populations do not necessarily coincide with a particular culture's idea of race (such as inhabitants of the Mediterranean area), this same example of disease demonstrates again the fact that racial groups are reliant on social ideology rather than biology. Furthermore, since there are no strict borders for populations and the human population has become more and more a global one rather than isolated groups, defining and discerning race *based on inherited traits* has become all the more difficult. See Peggy Pascoe's "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-

Century America” for an examination of how the social and legal understanding of race as biological shifted to become an understanding of race as cultural.

²² Glasgow, “On the Methodology of the Race Debate,” 334.

²³ See, for instance, the discussion of Spencer, below.

²⁴ Race—and the terms of its biological and/or social existence—form a substantial subject in philosophy. The philosophical analysis of race is concerned with the metaphysical or ontological conceptual of race and so, while fascinating, is not particularly relevant to my discussion because I am interested in how race functions in a practical sense regardless of how flawed our understandings of “race” are. It might be said, however, that the philosophical discussion should inform multiracial commentary since “race” is used in such a messy way so frequently. The precision with which some analytic philosophers approach race should help some commentators clarify their own arguments about what defines race. Furthermore, it is the philosophers who offer the most complete arguments about what “race” is.

²⁵ This is a common argument among academics and activists (including civil rights organizations) for a variety of reasons, some of which will be addressed in detail below.

²⁶ R. Spencer, “New Racial Identities, Old Arguments,” 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85–86.

³⁰ R. Spencer, *Challenging Multiracial Identity*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² J. M. Spencer, *The New Colored People*, 61; R. Spencer, “New Racial Identities, Old Arguments,” 89.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Graham’s “Letters from the Director” can all be found on the webpage listed in the Works Cited. Here and elsewhere, italics are in the original documents.

³⁵ Ironically, in “The Problem with the ‘Mixed’ Label” she states: “One day I really thought about why ‘mixed’ annoys me so much. I realized that if a person isn’t ‘mixed,’ what is he or she—*pure*? Wow. It sounds pretty neo-Nazi-Hitler-like to me. Do we really want to separate Americans into those who are pure and those who are mixed?” Despite offering no distinction between the meaning of “mixed race” as opposed to “multiracial” (she offers only an argument about the pejorative connotations of the former), she is contradicting her own subscription to the purity of monoracialness and the plurality of multiracialness.

³⁶ Rainier Spencer, for example, argues repeatedly that multiracial activism is entirely uncritical. Erica Childs’s study of online multiracial communities also demonstrates the proliferation of contradictory and problematic views like Graham’s as well as a distinct anti-black sentiment that does not engage with even the basics of the issues at hand. Childs demonstrates, for instance, how the two largest and most frequently visited websites “specifically and repeatedly argue that white and black opposition is the same” and so, according to one site, white supremacist opposition is considered “no less dangerous” than black civil rights organizations’ opposition (“Multirace.com,” 154–55). Unlike these sites, which are run by multiracially identified individuals, groups run by monoracially identified parents (statistically, most often white, middle-class mothers) tend to offer colorblind views on identity and thus do not engage with the important issues of functional identity, white supremacy, racism, and civil rights. Childs notes that academics conducting research, the media, and legislators who want to learn more about multiracialism and want to hear from multiracials all turn to these sites and organizations for information. But as she points out, the use of responses from participants in the sites as if they represent all multiracial people and families is extremely misleading because only those who subscribe to a very particular idea of multiracialism participate in such sites and organizations (*Ibid.*, 151). See also Minkah Makalani’s “Rejecting Blackness and Claiming Whiteness: Antiblack Whiteness in the Biracial Project” regarding multiracial activist websites.

³⁷ The Project RACE website has undergone great revision over the past few years and the organization’s leadership has changed. This quotation no longer appears on the site but was included at the time I first examined the website in 2010.

³⁸ Graham, “The Real World,” 44.

³⁹ Zack, “Mixed Black and White Race and Public Policy,” 126.

⁴⁰ Zack, *Race and Mixed Race*, 97.

⁴¹ R. Spencer, “Beyond Pathology and Cheerleading,” 117.

⁴² Pabst, “Blackness/Mixedness,” 202–3.

⁴³ Dalmage, *Tripping on the Color Line*, 149.

⁴⁴ Ferber, “Defending the Creation of Whiteness,” 56.

⁴⁵ R. Spencer, “Beyond Pathology and Cheerleading,” 117.

⁴⁶ Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas*, 6.

⁴⁷ Teixeira, “The New Multiracialism,” 24.

⁴⁸ Pabst, “Blackness/Mixedness,” 203.

⁴⁹ Daniel, *More Than Black?*, 174–75.

⁵⁰ See, for instance, the discussion of race abolitionists, below.

⁵¹ G. Reginald Daniel analyzes the cultural and theoretical discourses surrounding race and identifies the risks associated with the contemporary impulse to “transcend” race. Daniel argues that instead we need to pursue “racial transcendence” by acknowledging more complex and varied racial identities in a way that “does not dismiss the concept of race” itself but rather “interrogate[s] essentialist and reductionist notions of race and decenters racial categories by pointing out the ambiguity and multiplicity of identities” (*More Than Black?*, 179).

It is also useful to point out here that the arguments against abolishing race more generally are also used against efforts to abolish whiteness specifically. As Howard Winant warns, “efforts to *deconstruct* whiteness are more practical and more promising than

attempts to abolish it” (“White Racial Projects,” 98). Any shift away from a direct engagement with the functioning of race (and white privilege) threatens to undermine awareness of and resistance to racism. Vigilance among multiracial advocates and white studies scholars must be maintained for the same reasons.

⁵² There is work being done on the implications of largely white, middle-class, female leadership and participation in multiracial advocacy groups. For particularly astute discussions, see Kim Williams’s “Linking the Civil Rights and Multiracial Movements” and “Multiracialism and the Civil Rights Future” as well as Terri Karis’s “‘I Prefer to Speak of Culture’: White Mothers of Multiracial Children.” For other insightful discussions of white motherhood in interracial families, see especially France Winddance Twine’s “The White Mother: Blackness, Whiteness, and Interracial Families” and Rebecca Aanerud’s “The Legacy of White Supremacy and the Challenge of White Antiracist Mothering.”

⁵³ In relation to colorblindness, it is perhaps only fair to mention that there are other approaches to abolitionism. For instance, a white-led effort, centralized in the journal *Race Traitor* (with the motto: “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity”) proposes engaging directly with (and refusing) whiteness rather than ignoring race in colorblindness. (See John Garvey and Noel Ignatiev’s “Toward a New Abolitionism: A *Race Traitor* Manifesto.”) However, *Race Traitor*’s approach to abolition is tricky for similar reasons. For instance, Winant wonders, “is whiteness so flimsy that it can be repudiated by a mere act of political will—or even by widespread and repeated acts aimed at rejecting white privilege? I think not” (“White Racial Projects,” 107). Similarly, Paul Spickard points out that it not clear how the “‘defection’ from the White race” proposed in some scholarship “is to be accomplished, nor is it clear how one can disavow one’s Whiteness and make it stick” (“What’s Critical about White Studies,” 250). Furthermore, Margaret Andersen argues that it is a widespread problem in white studies that some analyses of whiteness insufficiently engage with racism and the entrenched practices of white supremacy and instead focus too much on whiteness itself in an isolated way. This approach, she argues, supposes un-usefully that “if white people were to abandon whiteness and change their minds, it would go away” (“Whitewashing Race,” 30). *Race Traitor*’s arguments, Andersen claims, do not account for the economic and social practices that arose within and would continue to produce racial stratification (Ibid., 31). See also Lisa A. Flores and Dreama G. Moon’s “Rethinking Race, Revealing Dilemmas: Imagining a New Racial Subject in *Race Traitor*” for commentary on *Race Traitor*.

⁵⁴ Powell, “The Colorblind Multiracial Dilemma,” 143.

⁵⁵ Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race’ in Twentieth-Century America,” 204.

⁵⁶ There is a considerable amount of ongoing scholarship surrounding “color-blind racism”. Most work that deals with multiracialism will take it up, in fact, especially the work by legal scholars. The scholarship examines the motivations, ambitions, and effects of colorblind policies and strategies and is essentially unanimous in condemning colorblindness as contrary to the interests of civil rights and social equality. See, for instance, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* and other scholars’ contributions to collections edited by Heather Dalmage, David Brunson, and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic.

⁵⁷ Walsh, “Ideology of the Multiracial Movement,” 220.

⁵⁸ Pabst, “Blackness/Mixedness,” 190.

⁵⁹ See, especially, Paul Spickard’s “The Power of Blackness: Mixed-Race Leaders and the Monoracial Ideal,” George Hutchinson’s “Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse” and “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race” (which includes a thoughtful interrogation of Thadious Davis’s authoritative work on Larsen and Charles R. Larson’s work on Larsen and Toomer) as well as Naomi Pabst’s “Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations Over Crossing Signs” and Chapter Four of Kathleen Pfeiffer’s *Race Passing and American Individualism*.

⁶⁰ DaCosta, “Interracial Intimacies, Barack Obama, and the Politics of Multiracialism,” 6.

⁶¹ Pabst, “Baby Janay and Naomi Pabst,” 39–40.

⁶² Williams, “Linking the Civil Rights and Multiracial Movements,” 81. See this article for an insightful analysis of how “a number of contemporary dynamics are seriously disrupting the logic of race as it was legally and socially understood and instituted” during Civil Rights, including changing demographics, and how such change is affecting black political struggle. Since civil rights protections apply to all minorities, civil rights discourse needs to take into account changing demographics (including multiracial identity).

⁶³ A noticeable characteristic of multiracial discourse is a focus on individual experience. There are numerous anthologies of first-person narratives, but even a large amount of academic work includes personal anecdotes. The fact that multiracial discourse so often relies on personal perspectives and that anthologies offer so many different perspectives emphasizes the heterogeneous nature of multiraciality and its theorization as well as the importance of individuals (rather than only a group) for multiracial identity.

⁶⁴ R. Spencer, “New Racial Identities, Old Arguments,” 98.

⁶⁵ See, especially, Terri Karis’s “‘I Prefer to Speak of Culture’: White Mothers of Multiracial Children.”

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