

EXCERPTED FROM

# Mixed Messages: Multiracial Identities in the “Color-Blind” Era

edited by  
David L. Brunσμα

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# Mixed Messages: Doing Race in the Color-Blind Era

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*David L. Brunsma*

Theories of race—of its meaning, its transformations, the significance of racial events—have never been a top priority in social science.

—Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986: 9)

Maria P. Root's groundbreaking collection, *Racially Mixed People in America*, published in 1992, was the first serious volume devoted to assessing the state of our understanding of mixed-race people in the United States. Before this publication, scholarship was far from objective in its attempt to unravel the issues surrounding racial identity and multiracial individuals. Although Root's anthology was indescribably important in the overall scholarship on multiraciality, in this book we present quite a different story about racial identity, racial ideology, racial social structure, and the multiracial individual through a much-needed critical lens.

A perennial starting point for research into multiracial identity and experience is the often cited *Who Am I?* question. In response to this central question, some scholarship has responded with a resounding "Black!" or "Asian!" and others with an equally resonant "Biracial!" or "Multiracial!" Root's anthology did attempt to place these scholarly and culturally rooted responses within the larger context of the meaning of race in the United States while still attending to the central multiracial question of *Who Am I?*

After decades (actually centuries) of negotiating the color lines of the most central axis of difference in the United States—black and white (or white and nonwhite)—multiracial Americans certainly have received (and produced, and provided data for scholars and journalists to produce) mixed messages. Root's anthology, predicated on a presupposed "biracial baby boom" following the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia v. Loving*, covers a lot of personal, multiracial ground. Root's

## 2 *Mixed Messages*

intentions were clear and actually ahead of their time, as seen in these opening lines:

The emergence of a racially mixed population is transforming the “face” of the United States. The increasing presence of multiracial people necessitates that we as a nation ask ourselves questions about our identity: Who are we? How do we see ourselves? Who are we in relation to one another? These questions arise in the context of a country that has held particular views of race—a country that has subscribed to race as an immutable construct, perceived itself as White, and been dedicated to preserving racial lines. Thus such questions of race and identity can only precipitate a full-scale “identity crisis” . . . that this country is ill-equipped to resolve. Resolving the identity crisis may force us to reexamine our constructions of race and the hierarchical social order it supports. (1992a: 3)

The question of *Who Am I?* was central to the Root collection, as its contributors sought to understand how multiracial Americans from a multitude of combinations negotiate their hybridity—how they understand themselves racially, how they develop their identities. However, the underlying focus was more about *individual* multiracial strategies of “doing race” and less about the macro, political, cultural, and historical processes of structured (and contested, restructured) racial meanings within which these very individual negotiations are embedded. The larger questions of race, racism, and racial justice, though implicit in Root’s anthology and her subject matter (and still embryonic and implicit in much of the literature on multiracial identity), remained largely untapped, leading to a mixed *message*. Instead of understanding the culturally, politically, and structurally located mixed messages that multiracial Americans have received (and professed) and how they have affected their own lives, Root and her colleagues entered a new message into the discourse—a *mixed* message—that mixed-race people, as a group, had something to say to all of us. Thus Root and her colleagues began to raise the question: *Who Are We?* This question cuts closer to the core for those of us interested in larger questions of race, racism, and racial justice; yet, even this question remains largely unexplored until now (but see Spencer 1999; Daniel 2000b; and, most recently, Dalmage 2004b).

*Racially Mixed People in America* was both a watershed in research on race and racial identity and a symbol of a nascent social movement. This new “multiracial movement” was beginning to redefine and discursively criticize racial classification systems in the United States (Daniel 2002; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2002a; Spencer 1999). Such discussions corresponded to similar endeavors within academia. However, at the same time that the multiracial movement and multiracial advocates were criticizing classification schemes, they also desired to have their members *classified* as *unambiguously multiracial*. Here was a burgeoning movement arguing *against* the essentialism and inheritability of race—again, in line with much

academic literature of the 1980s—while at the same time *reinscribing* essentialism and immutability onto multiraciality itself. With so many decontextualized, culturally contraband, and highly political messages and meanings associated with race and racial identity being pushed to the fore by this multiracial movement, what will be the result for the study of race and racial identity or the pursuit of social and racial justice for oppressed people of color in the United States? It is the answer to that question that the contributors to this book seek.

### ■ Outside the Frame

It is interesting to note that the Root anthology was nestled betwixt and between two other important publications: Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, published in 1986 (some six years before Root), and Stephen Steinberg's poignant *Turning Back: The Retreat from Racial Justice in American Thought and Policy*, published in 1995.

Omi and Winant's work is important to highlight here as the backdrop to Root's anthology on multiracial people in the United States. Omi and Winant provide a detailed and strident critique of the three major paradigms of "racial theory"—ethnicity models, class-based models, and nation-based theories—in order to more effectively flesh out their theory of racial formations. The theoretical scaffolding rests upon a central concept of "racial formations"—consider the following brief discussion of the racial formation process:

The meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed . . . *racial formation* . . . is the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings. Crucial to this formulation is the treatment of race as a central axis of social relations which cannot be subsumed under or reduced to some broader category or conception. (Omi and Winant 1986: 61–62)

The importance of this theoretical formulation for the study of multiracial identity and multiracial politics is undeniable, but it has been underutilized. Racial formations theory recognizes that, at the micro-interactional level, race is a matter of individuality and the formation of identities, whereas, at the macrolevel, race is a matter of the collective body focused on the formation of structured "sites" of contestation (economic, political, ideological, etc.). What this theory provides is a unique view of how the racial order is organized and enforced by the continuity and reciprocity *between* these two levels of social relations within a society and is politically,

culturally, and ideologically rearticulated through the governing body of that society (the “racial state”). Ultimately, here was a theory, proposed in the mid-1980s, that underlined the purposeful, ideological, and political social construction and contestation of race as an “unstable and decentered complex of social meanings constantly being transformed” (Omi and Winant 1986: 68). Indeed, at the microlevel multiracial identities are about rearticulating meanings about betwixt and betweenness, but so too do racial movements (multiracial, color-blindness, etc.) rearticulate racial meanings, preserving the racist social structure (Bonilla-Silva 2001) and the racial state (Mills 1997).

Providing a thought-provoking bookend to the Root anthology, Stephen Steinberg published *Turning Back* during Office of Management and Budget debates over the addition of a multiracial category to the US Census. Though Steinberg discusses neither Root nor the ongoing debate over racial classification in the United States, he does describe a general trend in US thought at the time. Steinberg painstakingly details a climate in which scholars and policymakers consistently turned away from interpretations of racial dynamics that highlighted racism and the structure of white privilege in the United States. Instead, these same people embarked on discussions of “anything but racism” (Horton and Sykes 2003), offering conclusions that blamed the victim, a largely euphemistic discourse, and a plethora of racial verbiage that did *not* advance notions and strategies of racial justice but “retreated” from them and hailed their “end.”

Although Root and her contributors could not have been aware of the specific concerns and arguments raised by Steinberg in his book—though the academic and political conditions discussed in *Turning Back* were extant at the time—the authors in Root’s collection most certainly would have been aware of the new, critical theoretical formulation contained within Omi and Winant’s pages. Both *Racial Formation* and *Turning Back* underscore the theoretical and empirical possibility that social construction of race (and “ethnorace”) can and does change via political, cultural, ideological, and academic routes. In addition, their arguments should give serious reflective pause to scholars interested in *all things multiracial* because it remains highly probable that such micro- and macrolevel alterations/rearticulations of racial formations help preserve white privilege and the structure of that privilege. Given this, it might be argued that the multiracial movement—the interactionally situated “doing” of race—is in very important ways epiphenomenal to the underlying racist social structure of the United States.

So, Root’s book was indeed an important starting point in the study of multiraciality. However, though the issue of multiracial identity is theoretically interesting, the move from a multiracial *Who Am I?* to a multiracial *Who Are We?* to an American (structural) *Who Are We?* has *not* been a central focus.

Investigations of multiraciality as a racial formation have *not* been of central importance. Questioning the impact of multiracial identity and the politics of the multiracial movement on racial justice pursuits in the United States have also *not* been foci. In fact, concerning “racial justice,” Root and her colleagues (and indeed the more general movement that her early work helped to spawn) seem to imply that the primary “injustice” for multiracial people is a classification system that forces them to choose. Although that view may be to some extent correct, it really misses the larger and more important links between racial identity, racial inequality, and racial justice—this book addresses these links.

### ■ A New Call

In the decade or so since *Racially Mixed People in America* first appeared, it has become increasingly clear that “race” is not something one *is*, but rather an elaborate, lived experience and cultural ritual of what one *does*. It is also clear that race and racism are embedded within the very social and cultural structures that make up society and that they are very real in the ways they structure our lives and futures—in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s highly relevant terminology, the processes of negotiating racial identities occurs in “racialized social systems” (2001). The time has come to explore the structures behind the patterns we have uncovered since the mid-1990s and come to grips with critical models of negotiations, strategies, and tactics that occur on the color line (or even a “color-blind color line”).

The existence, experience, and voices of multiracial individuals are challenging (rearticulating) the current categorizations of race, altering the meaning of racial identity, and in the process changing the cultural and structural fabric of race in the United States. The question is *how*? Earlier assumptions in the literature, beginning largely with *Racially Mixed People in America*, assumed that these “changes” could only be for the “better”—whatever that meant. The trajectory of multiracial research desperately needs to be self-critical, to be willing to adopt new lenses with which to view the phenomena at hand; in sum, the field of multiracial identity is at a place where those investigating such processes must begin to answer the classic “so what?” question. It is my hope that the contributions in the present volume will take this field into the realm where we can begin to address that question and push toward new and innovative investigations aimed at understanding the shifting racial terrain and how that will affect the prospects for racial equity and racial justice. Indeed, a key component of all the contributions in the volume is their critical reflection on how racial identity and the correlate racial identity politics will either help to alleviate or further reinforce the unrelenting structure and culture of racism and racial inequality.



## ■ Mixed Messages:

### Multiracial Identities in the “Color-Blind” Era

The chapters that follow focus on one of four broad dimensions: (1) detailed arguments and investigations into the historical, present, and future structural and cultural racial hierarchy in the United States and how racial identities (re)articulate these “shifting color lines”; (2) theoretically and empirically rich explorations into the ways that groups, movements, institutions, and the state have used multiraciality to expand, redraw, rearticulate, and commodify racial boundaries and the meanings of those boundaries; (3) in-depth analyses of how the socialization processes in families (largely interracial) translate shifting racial formations and changing meanings of race into ideologies of identity for mixed-race children; and (4) critical microlevel, interactional models of how race, interracial, and multiraciality are negotiated in context. All of the chapters also attend to the important implications of these processes for the pursuit of racial justice.

### *Part 1: Shifting Color Lines*

The first section of the book is devoted broadly to investigations into how racial lines are drawn and challenges to and reformations of the racial lines that illuminate the complex context from/within which the multiracial movement (and multiracial identity negotiations) can be more fruitfully examined.

Leading off this important contextualization is an insightful and theoretically valuable chapter by the author of the seminal and now classic *Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition* (1991): F. James Davis. In Chapter 2, Davis lays out his historically and comparatively grounded typology of statuses that mixed-race people can hold in modern societies. Here, he gives particular emphasis to the role of the US multiracial movement since the 1980s in reorganizing racial structures and challenging the one-drop rule; he also predicts which of the six alternatives in his model might be the path that multiracial Americans will pursue.

Resting upon this history, in Chapter 3 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David G. Embrick provide a rarity in sociological inquiry: they predict the future racial structure of the United States. These authors provide initial empirical glimpses into the earlier claim of Bonilla-Silva (2001) that the United States is moving from a bifurcated “biracial” system to a racial stratification system that is “triracial.”

Chapter 4, “Racial Justice in a Black/Nonblack Society,” outlines George Yancey’s deeply discerning and theoretically important argument predicting a society in which all nonblack peoples will align with the dominant groups in the United States, leaving blacks “alone in their struggle for racial justice.” This chapter, through specific critiques of previous models and strong arguments centered on the continuing and strengthening alienation of black Americans, provides an interesting counterpoint to Bonilla-Silva and Embrick’s chapter.

Jeffrey Moniz and Paul Spickard detail the specific case of racial formations in Hawaiian society, how they have changed, and the resulting racial discourse in Chapter 5. Important lessons can be learned from the history presented in this wonderfully original chapter—how multiraciality operates in current racial hierarchies and how colonized groups use essentialist ideologies. Specifically, the authors’ conceptual and theoretical development of the “midaltern” offers us new ways to actually look at fluid identity negotiations embedded within macrolevel racial formations and ideologies. In this chapter, the new theory of the midaltern promises to influence the next generation of identity scholars.

Rainier Spencer’s *Spurious Issues: Race and Multiracial Identity Politics in the United States* (1999) remains one of the most scholarly, intellectually stimulating, and epistemologically challenging treatises on multiraciality in recent years. In this spirit, Spencer, in Chapter 6, continues to seriously challenge assumptions that have run rampant in the scholarly and popular literature on multiraciality in the United States, arguing that in the end multiracial discourse serves to further reinforce the idea of race and the idea of the immutability of things racial. This chapter demands that we dig deeper and engage in much more critical analyses of the phenomena at hand.

Chapter 7 brings us Charles A. Gallagher, an expert in the symbolic boundaries of whiteness. Gallagher here pays close attention to the current racial formation of “color blindness” so closely linked to the multiracial movement. Ultimately, he considers how in the future multiracial identities will follow a “which drop rule,” in which certain offspring of certain interracial unions will be “privileged while others are relegated to the bottom of the racial pecking order.” Thus the distribution of resources may be tied in complex ways to a more complex racial order, but a *racial* order nonetheless—even within a so-called “color-blind” formation—with disturbing implications for the pursuit of racial justice.

Rounding out Part 1 of this volume, Hayward Derrick Horton reiterates the role of racism and offers a reappraisal of the emergence of the “neo-mulatto” population in the United States. By putting forth an idea of “white-space,” Horton underscores the importance of racism and the structural nature of the term “neo-mulatto.”

## ***Part 2: Manipulating Multiracial Identities***

The authors in Part 2 investigate how relevant institutional, political, and cultural actors have collectively transformed the ideas of race, multirace, and racialized beings into particular racial formations and how these actors deploy formations of “color-blindness,” multiracial identities and ideologies, and symbols and images of multiraciality to pursue certain political, ideological, and economic ends. Thus, the authors in Part 2 investigate how multiraciality has been manipulated, looking deeper into the connections between the parameters set by racial formations; the social, political, and

cultural racial projects that interacted with these parameters; and how these projects did or did not pursue racial justice.

Readers unfamiliar with G. Reginald Daniel's work in *More Than Black: Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order* (2000) are in for a treat as Daniel and Josef Manuel Castañeda-Liles consider the Racial Privacy Initiative, or Proposition 54, which in 2003 asked California voters to decide whether racial data would be collected by California governmental agencies. In Chapter 9, these two authors assess the multiracial movement, the census debates, and the rise of the Racial Privacy Initiative in the larger context of a struggle for racial justice, concluding that it "remains to be seen whether a greater coalition can be built between multiracial and traditional civil rights organizations," given the evidence of the links between the multiracial movement and notions of essentialism, hierarchy, and inequality.

Interracial sexuality has been fundamental to the construction and maintenance of the symbolic boundaries of whiteness. In Chapter 10, Abby L. Ferber, author of *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (1998), investigates the ways in which white supremacist discourse has theorized multiraciality. Arguing that the construction of race cannot be fully grasped without a discussion of boundary work and race mixing, she sheds a bright light on the racial project of white separatism and how notions of multiraciality and whiteness help to define such a project.

Johanna E. Foster's chapter, "Defining Racism to Achieve Goals: The Multiracial and Black Reparations Movements," presents a cutting-edge, thought-provoking, and inspiring analysis of how two social movements (which both articulate their ideologies as distinct from that of traditional civil rights movements) define and incorporate notions of race and racial identity differently in the pursuit of their objectives. Foster focuses on the complex and intriguing discursive correspondence between the politics of racial classification and white structural privilege. Her luminous analysis concludes by describing how movements could attack global white supremacy.

In Chapter 12, Kimberly McClain DaCosta shifts our focus to the marketplace and the ways in which images of multiraciality and ideologies of color blindness are being used to bolster profit margins. Hers is a truly innovative analysis of an extensive set of practices of marketing to, by, and of multiracials. From descriptions of reinscribed essentialism in hair products to broader ideological rearticulations of color blindness, DaCosta's chapter is a unique study in the commodification of the body, target marketing, and the processes of racialization.

### ***Part 3: Socialization in Multiracial Families***

Since families in many important ways link the broader macrolevel racial formations and microlevel processes of negotiating racial identities, they are crucial to understanding how existing racial paradigms and racialized

parameters of the self are reproduced and can be challenged. Interracial families, through parenting practices, racial socialization, and in some cases antiracial socialization practices, may mediate these broader structures and create a space for understanding how race is taught, done, and maintained in the familial context and, perhaps, in other institutionalized contexts as well.

In their book *Raising Biracial Children* (2005), Kerry Ann Rockquemore and Tracey Laszloffy synthesizes the vast literature on racial identity among mixed-race people and translates those ideas into concrete applicable strategies for nurturing multiracial children. In Chapter 13, Rockquemore, Tracey Laszloffy, and Julia Noveske look at how racial socialization processes in interracial families are comparable to and/or different from those of monoracial families. One highly pertinent finding from this important contribution is that a parent's racial ideology may be an infinitely more essential component of determining racial socialization processes than the parent's race.

No volume such as this one would be complete without the work of France Winddance Twine. She has written a truly original contribution to address the focal questions of this section to be sure, but the illuminating research she presents in Chapter 14 also speaks volumes to the larger questions motivating this book. Using data from black/white multiracial families in England, she asks how these family members translate the logics of race and racism while also attempting to transfer particular racialized identities to their children. She discusses this subject through an original theoretical lens of "racial literacies."

In "Black and White: Family Opposition to Becoming Multiracial," Erica Chito Childs, author of *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds*, approaches the dilemmas faced by interracial couples in the current color-blind era. The empirical mismatch between attitudinal support for interracial relationships/marriage and actual, on-the-ground opposition to such unions leads Childs to interrogate the classic question of "concern" raised by opposing family members: "What about the children?" Through extensive in-depth interviews and keen insight, this chapter underlines the fact that broader collective fears and notions about race and racial difference are central components to our constructions of families and identities.

#### ***Part 4: Dilemmas of Multiracial Identity***

Departing from the macro- and mesolevel contextualizations of multiraciality in society explored in the previous sections, Part 4 focuses on the microlevel, sociopsychological processes of "doing race" in social interactions. The chapters herein look at various "dilemmas" surrounding racially, interracially, and multiracially tinged circumstances. This broad approach leads us down several interrelated paths: how racial identity can be seen as a

resource, how it is manipulated and altered across various contexts, when and how it remains consistent in different “identity markets,” how culture affects strategies of racial identity through empirical and theoretical considerations of the role of appearance, clothing, and language.

R. L’Hereux Lewis and Kanika Bell begin this section with a chapter that develops a much-needed theoretical model, taking into account the various levels of analysis presented throughout the flow of this book and providing researchers interested in racial and multiracial identities with a way to understand how identities are deployed and negotiated in social interactions. Combining individual characteristics, social context, reference group orientation, and situation of encounter, their intersectional model of identity is a fresh addition to scholarship on identity negotiation. Their conclusion provides important insights into the role of threat and coping in identity work and pursuits of racial justice in a society.

In Chapter 17, readers are in for a treat as Kathleen Korgen, author of *Crossing the Racial Divide: Close Friendships Between Black and White Americans* (2002), and Eileen O’Brien, author of *Whites Confront Racism: Antiracists and Their Paths to Action* (2001), look closely at how color-blind racial ideology plays itself out in long-term, close, black/white friendship dyads. Their intriguing research design and immensely rich data allow them to pursue investigations into the ways in which these interracial friendships produce or do not produce significant antiracist activism within these individuals. They find that “simply becoming friends, even *close* friends, with black Americans will not motivate most white Americans to combat or even recognize racism in U.S. society.”

Benjamin Bailey’s “Black and Latino: Dominican Americans Negotiate Racial Worlds” uncovers a great deal of the complexities underlying racial identity strategies. In Chapter 18, Bailey looks at a sample of Dominican Americans, whose appearances range from individuals matching the African phenotype to those aligning more closely with the European phenotype. Despite their physical appearance, these individuals negotiate their identity somewhere outside the traditional U.S. black/white dichotomy. By looking at the subjective and performed aspects of race, Bailey uncovers many tertiary symbolic systems (i.e., linguistic, etc.) undergirding how these Dominican young adults navigate their identities. His work here is an important contribution to our knowledge of microprocesses of racial projects that both inform/alter and are informed by/alterd by racial formations in the United States.

In Chapter 19, Heather Dalmage, whose clear and critical voice has influenced many of the authors in this volume through works such as *Triping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World* (2000) and *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (2004), brings us an autoethnographic, personal, and analytical account of the color line in the United States and the implications for those

who cross such a potent symbolic boundary—even in the color-blind era. Through a specific look into the housing market, she investigates the dilemmas faced by multiracial families in the search for a home—both literally and figuratively. She ends up with a poignant discussion about the struggle to weave a new “garment” that we can don in the struggle for racial justice in the United States.

An eminent scholar known for his work in both the psychology of racism and the racism of psychology, Kwame Owusu-Bempah engages in a discussion in Chapter 20 concerning the dilemmas faced by multiracials and critically assesses the possible racial projects occurring in the counseling office. His contribution adds a slew of strong questions for both scholars and those in professional therapeutic practice to consider when we write about, think about, and involve ourselves in the lives of multiracial people—calling people to “unflinching, resolute commitment to racial justice.”

Rounding out the volume is a grounded contribution by Debbie Storrs, who pursues the shifting of racial boundaries by mixed-race women in their identity work. Interestingly, her respondents reject the option of identifying with the category “multiracial”; the women favored a nonwhite identity and challenged community and institutionalized notions of racial belonging through linguistic and other cultural markers. In the end, the ideological root of their cultural identity work is essentialism that, unfortunately, does more to reproduce our racial terrain than fracture it.