

The Racial Politics of Mixed Race

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I

Recently there has been an increasing amount of attention given in academic, political, and popular settings in the United States to the experiences and identities of mixed-race or multiracial people. In the academic realm, there is a growing body of work that can generally be called mixed-race racial theory, including, for instance, pieces anthologized in Maria P. P. Root's 1992 and 1996 volumes *Racially Mixed People in America* and *The Multiracial Experience*, and Naomi Zack's 1995 collection *American Mixed Race*. There are also many popular autobiographical pieces about mixed race, several periodicals devoted to mixed-race people, a deluge of talk shows on the subject, and both local and national organizations that serve as support groups or political interest groups for mixed-race people.¹ Much of the more theoretical work emphasizes the issue of individual rights for mixed-race people—particularly the right to an “accurate” racial identity on forms such as the Census.² An enormous portion of the literature also analyzes the experiences of mixed-race individuals from a sociological or psychological point of view. Frequently the discussion of the rights of mixed-race people in fact draws upon the social scientific research that indicates that such things as the lack of the opportunity to identify officially as mixed race or multiracial has detrimental effects on the self-concept, self-esteem, and development of mixed-race people, particularly children.

The focus of interest groups such as the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) has been to change governmental and school forms to include a multiracial category, for they see the current classificatory schemas as violating the rights of mixed-race people. Carlos Fernández, former president of AMEA, writes of that organization:

We believe that every person, especially every child, who is multiethnic/interracial has the same right as any other person to assert an identity that embraces the fullness and integrity of their actual ancestry, and that every multiethnic/interracial family, whether biological or adoptive, has the same right to grow and develop as any other, and that our children have the right to love and respect each of their parents equally. (Fernández 1995, 193)

He explains that “AMEA’s argument is that OMB Directive 15 and all government practices that involve the gathering of racial/ethnic statistics

must dispense with the rule of hypodescent as a matter of civil rights under the U.S. Constitution" (Fernández 1996, 29). AMEA proposes changing the OMB Statistical Directive 15 by adding a multiracial and multiethnic category as well as an additional section for multiracial/multiethnic people to specify the races and ethnicities of their parents. They claim that requiring such a change in official forms would permit classifying all people "accurately" according to their "actual identity." Susan Graham, director of Project RACE, makes a similar comment, claiming that "self-esteem is directly tied to accurate racial identity" (Graham 1995, 189), and proposes "the addition of the classification multiracial to the five basic racial and ethnic categories without further breakdown," arguing in favor of this over AMEA's proposal so that "multiracial children would only check multiracial and not be forced to list the race and ethnicity of their mothers and fathers" (Graham 1996, 44).

Consistent with the work of these activist groups is theoretical work such as that of Naomi Zack. Zack's positions are complex, for she develops one set of arguments based on her belief that the racial order depends on biological fictions and produces self-contradictory rules of categorization (for instance, given the current classificatory schema, she can name the following set of contradictory claims about her identity: she is Jewish because her mother is Jewish; she is white because Jews are to be counted as white; she is black because anyone with at least one black forebear is black and she has at least one black forebear; one cannot be both black and white; Zack 1992). Her recognition of this problematization of race especially for mixed-race individuals leads her to the position of deracination, the position in which she "will accept no racial designations" (Zack 1992, 9). However, she recognizes that "in ordinary, walking-around reality, the deracinated person will not have solved anything" because "people will still insist on categorizing her racially and her explicit refusal to participate in their (racializing) attempts will only add to their scorn and dislike of her," and that "intellectually, deracination is not in harmony with the spirit of the times" (Zack 1992, 9); thus she is led to retreat from "ordinary, walking-around reality," arguing that "in the case of mixed-race existence, the life of the mind may be the only possible life at this time in American history" and "outside of one's activities as an intellectual, that is, outside of the life of the mind, one has no secure racial existence" (Zack 1995b, 298).

Perhaps because she cannot always survive as "a refugee to the life of the mind" (Zack 1995b, 299), Zack must hold a double position on mixed race. Thus despite her assertions about retreating to the racelessness that is possible only in the life of the mind and despite her desire to "stay on the level that all notions of race are fictions," Zack is also willing to develop a second set of arguments through which she thinks about public policy questions such as those surrounding the identities of mixed black and white individuals, and to do so she "provisionally [goes] along with the fiction that there are such things as black and white race" (Zack 1995c, 126). Her conclusion on this level is that mixed-race individuals must have the right to decide for themselves how to identify, and that ensuring this right must involve the inclusion of a multiracial category for public record keeping.

She writes, for instance, that “this right for a mixed race person to be mixed race seems to be a fundamental requirement for psychological and social health,” and she cites the United Nations Charter to backup her arguments that mixed black and white individuals must be guaranteed the opportunity to identify as such (Zack 1995c, 126).

Maria P. P. Root also focuses her concern with mixed-race people on the question of individual rights, titling one of her pieces “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People.” Although several of the rights she demands, such as “the right not to keep the races separate within me” and “the right to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify,” are linked in her explanations to an argument for changing the Census categories, many of the rights have to do with changing social expectations to free racially mixed people from what Root argues are oppressive and psychologically damaging experiences within the racial order (Root 1996a, 8, 10).

II

An individual’s psychological health is one of the things that is at stake in a consideration of how she identifies or is identified within the racial state. I think it is important to notice, however, that individuals do not always prioritize their psychological well-being when making choices within the racial state, and that initiating political change, including changes that accompany antiracist politics, may not always be compatible with security. Striking illustrations of this are given by Gloria Anzaldúa throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* in which she emphasizes the sometimes torturous psychological demands of maintaining her mestiza identity, an identity she embraces even given the tortures of its ambiguity. In contrast to those who advocate a multiracial category for the purpose of ameliorating psychological hardship, for Anzaldúa having a mixed or mestiza identity means “floundering in uncharted seas” (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). Inhabiting and surviving the Borderlands—which is among other things a racial borderlands—allows for her to “turn the ambivalence into something else” (Anzaldúa 1987, 79); she becomes a crossroads, though the survival is not easy: “Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to/resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle, /the pull of the gun barrel, /the rope crushing the hollow of your throat” (Anzaldúa 1987, 194). Although I do not want to romanticize the suffering suggested here, I do want to recognize that some people do not lament their lack of access to a “secure racial existence”,³ even given the choice, they may choose to sacrifice security in favor of something else.

This leads me to want to explore beyond the question of the *right* to racial self-identification for mixed-race people (I am not questioning that mixed-race people should have such a right), and ask instead what might be the meaning of the various choices that could be made *given* that right. The focus of the mixed-race movement seems to assume the prioritization of securing psychological well-being for mixed-race people by creating a legitimate space for them to fit in within the racializing categories of the United

States, though many mixed-race theorists or activists mention that they only accept this solution because the end of the racial state itself is not yet in sight. Much of the literature implies that “mixed race” or “multiracial” is so obviously the correct racial designation for those with mixed racial heritage that they do not consider that there is a politics to racial self-identification beyond securing a sense of fitting in, though some, including Naomi Zack, recognize that only a small percentage of those with mixed racial heritage would choose to identify as mixed race.⁴ What are the politics of identifying as mixed race in official or in personal, everyday contexts? What are the politics of insisting on identifying as black, or as Asian, or as belonging to another group of people of color, assuming one had both the option of doing so and the option of doing otherwise?

I am going to investigate these questions by situating them within a framework elaborated by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), a framework in which many acts performed within a racial state are understood as having a place in the process of racial formation, where racial formation is “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). The process of racial formation depends upon the direction of what Omi and Winant refer to as the trajectory of racial politics. This trajectory is influenced by competing racial projects, projects that simultaneously represent or articulate certain understandings of race and affect social structures in ways that are racially significant. “Racial change,” according to Omi and Winant, “is the product of the interaction of racially based social movements and the racial state” (Omi and Winant 1994, 88). Individual acts of mixed-race racial self-identification, the proliferation of mixed-race racial theory, and the work of activist groups such as AMEA and Project RACE are all examples of what Omi and Winant call racial projects, even when those who participate in them do not think of themselves as engaging in racial politics.

Racial formation takes place in explicitly political contexts, such as when the meaning of race is rearticulated in the process of the lobbying efforts to change the U.S. Census (Omi and Winant refer to this as racial formation on a macro level), and it also takes place in everyday encounters in which people reinforce, reshape, or resist the meanings of race (this is the micro level). For instance, it takes place on the level of everyday experience when mixed-race people are constantly confronted with questions like, “Where are you from, no, I don’t mean New York, I mean where are you from, you know, what are you?” a sort of encounter described by an overwhelming number of mixed-race people in relating their experiences.⁵ Thus both in explicitly political contexts such as checking off a box on the Census and thereby affecting resource distribution, and in everyday personal encounters, there are choices being made by mixed-race people (as well as by all other people in a racial state) about which racial projects to engage in. To recognize this is to see that the act of adding a “multiracial” category to the Census is misrepresented when it is described as a way to permit mixed-race people to “accurately” name their “actual” identity, as if racial identities were objectively given facts that the Census should simply reflect; rather, it is an act that helps produce a new racial identity. In the racial state

one is constantly engaging in racial projects unintentionally, since one cannot help but have one's actions racialized, cannot help but participate in an articulation of race. Using Omi and Winant's framework allows me to ask: what are the racial politics of the mixed-race "movement"? Do the racial projects of the mixed-race racial "movement" move the trajectory of racial politics in a liberatory direction?

III

Since my discussion has been shifting from questions of racial identity to questions of racial politics, I would like to make explicit how the two are connected in discourses about mixed race. The "where are you from?" or "what are you?" questions encountered by mixed-race people are telltale in an important way: they reveal that the popular show of concern over mixed-race people is about identity, rather than about political loyalty. However, I believe that what frequently may be concealed in the questions about identity are questions of loyalty, for it is presumed that loyalty is itself determined by identity. The question "what are you?" may *stand for* the unasked "where does your political allegiance lie?" Suppose one's true concern, however, is with the political questions, such as "will you stand with people of color against racism?" Does a response that comes in the form of an assertion of identity really tell one anything? Does an answer "I'm mixed race" indicate less of a sense of solidarity in the struggle against racial oppression than, for instance, the answers "I'm black" or "I'm a person of color"? What about the answer "I'm white," which, when coming from a person whose heritage is designated as racially mixed under the racial state, is most often construed as an act of passing?

Declarations of identity can indeed be one way of expressing political solidarity with a racialized group, since it is hard to "cast one's lot" with a racialized group without being publicly identified as a member of the group with whom one casts one's lot. Casting one's lot, which I take to involve not only being politically committed to the struggles of a group but also sharing in their fate, can be done through a believable public identification as a member of a racialized group, or through a refusal to pass as a member of a more privileged racialized group. Not all acts of solidarity consist of casting one's lot, for one can be committed to struggle on behalf of a group to which one does not belong and in whose fate one cannot share. For instance, an antiracist white person, however much she wants to cast her lot with people of color, will not share their fate unless her very whiteness is "tainted" through her identity or at least through her associations. In fact, white people can "taint" their whiteness, often without intending to, by, for instance, raising mixed-race children or being in (heterosexual or gay/lesbian) interracial relationships; when this happens whites do to some extent share in the fate of the racialized group they are tied to, experiencing what Ruth Frankenberg refers to as racism that "rebounds on white women in interracial relationships" (Frankenberg 1993, 112). Even so, Frankenberg finds in her study of such women, "these women's departures from their own racial positions and identities were symbolic or temporary: they were not

permanently 'unwhitened'" (Frankenberg 1993, 113). To the extent that a person has any choice in or control over how she is racialized (and it is important to remember that most often one does not have this choice), an insistence on identifying as a person of color can be an indication of a willingness to share in the fate of the racially oppressed. However, this is not to say that one must identify with or share in the fate of a group in order to be politically committed to it.

Naomi Scheman writes about embracing a Jewish identity in terms of this willingness to cast her lot, a willingness that in practical terms happens to be beside the point, since she also experiences herself as having no choice in whether or not she is Jewish, but nonetheless it is an important willingness to express;⁶ she writes: "in the light of history, it is a matter of honor not to walk away from the people with whom history has given me 'a shared fate'" (Scheman 1992, 191).⁷ For Scheman, however, and for others who identify or are identified in the racial state as monoracial and belonging to an oppressed or persecuted racialized group, it may be fairly clear with whom history has given one a shared fate. It may be clear whom it would be a matter of honor not to walk away from when trouble comes.⁸

If a mixed-race person wants to align herself with the racially oppressed, to both share in their fate and stand with them in a struggle against racism, it is not clear what the politics of *identity* are here: is an *identity* as mixed race itself an expression of solidarity with a racially oppressed people, namely, with mixed-race people as a group? Or is it a form of walking away from the racially oppressed, away from the of-color identity that could be claimed in oneself, since currently in the United States "mixed-race" or "multiracial" are generally taken to connote something whiter than the "unmixed" or "darker" of the possible identities one could claim in oneself, and this seems to be true even when the mixture is of different groups of people of color? It is perhaps because of the centering of whiteness and the dominance of the black-white paradigm of racial relations in the United States that the term "mixed race" is often associated with or assumed to mean mixed black and white race, and as such it is taken to mean "whiter than. . ." If, because of this paradigm, the term "mixed race" has come to connote a group that is closer to whiteness than any of the designated of-color groups, then even those who are mixed but have no white/Anglo heritage can be whitened through their identification with the term "mixed race."

Lisa Jones asks: "As black/white biracials, when we distance ourselves from the African-American freedom struggle, from aging, though historically critical, ideas like 'black power' and 'black community,' do we fail to honor a history that brought us to where we are today?" (Jones 1994, 59). Who are the people with whom history has given mixed-race people "a shared fate"? What group of people would it be a matter of honor for mixed-race people not to walk away from?

IV

I will return to explore the question of whether and when an identity as mixed race could be an expression of political solidarity with mixed-race

people as a distinct, racially oppressed group with a sense of collective subjectivity, but I want to look first at how a mixed-race identity is seen as a failure of loyalty toward the of-color group or, in the case of a mixture of different groups of people of color, as a failure of loyalty toward each of these groups. The identification of "mixed race" is often seen or experienced by the of-color or racially oppressed group(s) as an act of betrayal in the form of a whitening. Here identity and politics are presumed to be linked; as one takes on a whiter identity, so the assumption goes, one gains greater privilege through one's own enhanced racial status, and not through fighting against racism itself. One has walked away from one's people or at least away from other people of color, no longer to share in their fate. This charge of betrayal can be aimed at an individual who passes as white or whiter (for instance, when "mixed race" is taken to be a whiter identity than "black"),⁹ or it can be aimed at an entire racialized group whose status as a racialized group rises towards privilege, toward whiteness.

In a country in which group after group has become white through the shifting movements of racial formation while other groups remain racialized as unassimilatable it is worth asking what the politics of the mixed-race movement are explicitly in terms of whether it is an attempt to whiten a group of people or, to escape from blackness or from other racialized of-color groups. Perhaps this question bothers me particularly because as a Jew and someone whose family has indeed paid, in the words of James Baldwin, the "extraordinary price for becoming white" (Baldwin 1984, 90), I cannot help but wonder whether those of the mixed-race movement are the next group of people who are about to pay that extraordinary price.¹⁰

In Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz's analysis of Baldwin's phrase, the extraordinary price for becoming white is not only paid in the currency of assimilation and its attendant losses of culture, language, tradition, and so on, but is also paid in the form of a loss of solidarity with other people of color, thus making solidarity, for her, the opposite of whiteness; the buying of whiteness comes at the cost of solidarity (Kaye/Kantrowitz 1992, 1996). She writes, "I may be secular, but I know holiness when I hear it. One of its names is solidarity, the opposite of 'whiteness.' The more you claim it, honor it, and fight for it, the less it costs" (Kaye/Kantrowitz 1996, 134). Betrayal, on the other hand, is painful and costly.

A poignant moment of betrayal, simply because an identity choice carries implications of refused solidarity or loyalty, is described by Sarah Willie, and I will quote it now at length:

When the census taker, a woman of African descent, skin the color of coffee-no-cream, came to my door with twelve-inch extensions in her hair and glow-in-the-dark blue contact lenses, I looked into the face of my sister.

"I sent it in," I said, referring to the census form.

She didn't believe me. She did not ask me my racial background but checked off the box next to Black American/African American/Afro-Caribbean/Black African. Having checked that same box myself when I mailed my census form in, this time I hesitated.

"Will this invalidate my previous form?" I asked.

Her mouth said it would. But my powers of telepathy heard her mind as, "What does this annoying girlfriend do for a living?"

I agreed to satisfy her request and answered, for the second time, the census questions. Having checked the box marked Black American/African American/Afro-Caribbean/Black African when I mailed my census form in, this time I met her eyes and said, "I'm not Black; I'm Other, Mixed, Black and White." Her pupils, fixed by the contact lenses, neither expanded nor contracted, she did not smile, smirk, or frown, but checked the box marked "Other," and lifted her eyes quickly to mine again. I wanted to see her erase "Black." She did not do so in my presence. Pre-occupied with self, my telepathic ability had instantly evaporated and I could not read her. She thanked me. But the price of my self-definition had been the wall I felt I'd built between us before I ever closed the door.

I had been focused on my personal freedom, on my right to define who I am, on my responsibility to my sense of self. The dignity of the census taker was not a part of my mental equation. "But the census isn't about the census takers," a friend said to me. Oh, but it is. And what we do with that knowledge requires vigilant thoughtfulness. (Willie 1996, 276-77)

Reading Willie's story of betrayal as she faces the census taker immediately brought to my mind a description by Adrienne Rich of a similarly painful moment of betrayal, probably because there have been so many moments in my own life when, just as Rich did in this incident, I have failed to express my belonging with Jews. Here is the moment described by Rich:

One day that year [1947] I was in a small shop where I had bought a dress with a too-long skirt. The shop employed a seamstress who did alterations, and she came in to pin up the skirt on me. I am sure that she was a recent immigrant, a survivor. I remember a short, dark woman wearing heavy glasses, with an accent so foreign I could not understand her words. Something about her presence was very powerful and disturbing to me. After marking and pinning up the skirt, she sat back on her knees, looked up at me, and asked in a hurried whisper: "You Jewish?" Eighteen years of training in assimilation sprang into the reflex by which I shook my head, rejecting her, and muttered, "No."

There are betrayals in my life that I have known at the very moment were betrayals: this was one of them. (Rich 1986, 108-109)

V

Why does it seem like a betrayal when a person opts for a closer-to-white identity or when a racialized group of people becomes white or whiter through the changing landscape of racial politics? Is it really a betrayal? Zack suggests that the answer to this question is no, at least for those who are mixed black and white race. She addresses what she hears as

the “implied moral argument” that a mixed black and white race person is not in good faith when not identifying as black. Her response is that “the argument is only persuasive as long as one accepts the strongly asymmetrical kinship schema of racial designation” (Zack 1992, 8). In other words, her claim is that since there is no true sense in which someone really is black just because she is designated as black in a racial state that accepts the one-drop rule, there is no sense in which it is more authentic for this person to identify as black. However, I believe that there are other grounds for the argument that there is a moral or political injunction for mixed black and white race people to, if not identify as black, then to express either solidarity with or loyalty to black struggles or more broadly the struggles of people of color. In fact, there is the very same argument to be made that white people, in order to be antiracist, should express and act on the same solidarity. The difference is that mixed-race people have the option of expressing this solidarity through their own identities, whereas white people generally do not. It is not that black and white mixed-race people have a special obligation by virtue of their somehow really being black to identify as such; it is just that they have the option of expressing solidarity or loyalty in this particular way.

So I will probe a little further the question of whether the mixed-race “movement” evidences a lack of solidarity with (other) peoples of color. Laurie Shrage suggests that “while claiming a mixed identity may marginally improve the treatment of mixed individuals, it will do little for unmixed people of the stigmatized races and ethnicities” (Shrage 1995, 291). Others have pointed out that the formation of a “multiracial” category could resemble a bit too closely the creation of the “coloured” category in South Africa. David Theo Goldberg argues that a mixed-race category does not challenge the primacy of race and of racial classification, and can in fact offer new ways to employ race in the service of inequality. He invokes the example of the South African category of “coloured” in order to “reveal how the undertaking to undo the insidious implications of the racial project via mixed-race hybridity impales itself on its racializing assumptions” (Goldberg 1995, 247). He remarks that “mixed race . . . came to mean mixed status: fewer rights and a more tenuous social position than whites, but significantly better conditions than those faced by the overwhelming majority of ‘Africans’” (Goldberg 1995, 249).

Lisa Jones has similar suspicions about the mixed-race “movement,” asking skeptically, “Cape Town, U.S.A.?” (Jones 1994, 58). Pondering who is behind the movement and what their intentions are, she asks: “Are they white parents of mixed-race *bambinos* bartering for a safety zone for their *café-au-lait* kids?” (Jones 1994, 55). She interviews several people active in the movement and finds that her suspicions are well founded: “Biraciality was posited by some as an escape from the ‘blemish of blackness’” (Jones 1994, 61). Jones cites the case of one white mother who had removed her child, whom she identified as biracial, from the public schools because they had no “appropriate” racial category on their official forms; Jones, who herself has mixed racial heritage and identifies as black, writes that this woman “asked me quite innocently if I knew how degrading it was ‘to be

attached to categories like black or Hispanic” (Jones 1994, 61). Hopefully this comment is not representative of others in the movement. However, Jones further notes that “the census movement had no alliances with progressive organizations representing other people of color” (Jones 1994, 58).

It is possible that the white parents “bartering for a safety zone” for their mixed-race kids may in fact be trying to protect their own whiteness, for a child who is referred to as, for instance, mixed black and white, may make a white parent feel more assured that the whiteness in herself has been preserved, reappearing as the whiteness in the mixture. Furthermore, to have the idea of mixed-race children normalized through the proper categories on official forms is also to normalize and destigmatize the interracial relationships that may have produced the children (though of course, one might parent a mixed-race child without being a part of an interracial relationship, but nevertheless, parents of mixed-race children tend to be assumed to be in an interracial relationship). Part of what Ruth Frankenberg’s research on white women reveals is that when white women enter into interracial relationships with Chicano or African American men, their white femininity becomes constructed in the discourse against interracial relationships as “compromised, hypersexual or perverted”; that is, the sexual stereotypes about their Chicano or African American male lovers wears off on them (Frankenberg 1993, 88). Normalizing interracial relationships thus may work to preserve the whiteness of the white member of the relationship, and since women’s sexuality is already suspect a white woman in an interracial relationship may be particularly anxious not to subject her sexuality to racist scrutiny. Furthermore, the rebound racism described by Frankenberg may, especially in the case of white parents of mixed-race children, take a distorted form, for the parent may experience not the rebounded version of the racism that the child actually experiences, but instead a rebounded version of what they (the parents) project onto their children, and they may project what they themselves are afraid of experiencing: a tainting of their whiteness. The white mother who worried for her child that it would be degrading “to be attached to categories like black or Hispanic” may be expressing her own racist fear of being attached to these categories herself. As she holds tight to her treasured whiteness, solidarity with people of color vanishes.

It seems then that there is truth to the charge that at least some currents in the mixed-race movement and in the push to change the census categories are attempts to preserve or attain whiteness, to escape blackness or other of-color racialized groups, an attempt that is at times motivated by racism and that sacrifices solidarity. One can see why the mixed-race movement or individual acts of mixed-race self-identification are taken to be instances of betrayal, of walking away from one’s people and improving one’s own lot without carrying others along. I do not, however, believe that this is the only current or the only possible current in the politics of mixed race. The other current I want to consider is the one that aims to make mixed race an emergent collective (rather than individual) identity with connotations of shared struggle as a group of people of color.

VI

If Omi and Winant are correct in thinking that it is primarily through clashes with social movements that the racial state is changed and that the process of racial formation thereby takes place, then it will be important to consider what kind of social movement is tied to mixed-race identification, and whether such movement calls for collective subjectivity. Indeed there are the signs of something resembling a social movement, complete with much "normal channel" politicking such as lobbying, a march on Washington (July 20, 1996) and an odd kind of pride politics, one that celebrates an individual rather than a group identity: "proud to be me" read the posters, echoing such slogans as "black and proud" but with a signifying difference ("Rally Held," 1996). It is not clear whether a collective subjectivity is developing and thus whether this is a racially based social movement rather than just the "normal" political demands that the state meet its own promises to deliver on certain individual rights. For Omi and Winant, "racially based movements have as their most fundamental task the creation of new identities, new racial meanings, and a new collective subjectivity" (Omi and Winant 1994, 90).

I think it is important to ask whether there is a sense of collective subjectivity possible among mixed-race people in part because if so then there is another approach to the issue of betrayal; there would be support for the claim that mixed-race identification is not an act of abandoning racially based social movements but rather an act of creating a new one. If an identity as mixed race expresses a collective identity then one response to my earlier question, what group of people would it be a matter of honor for mixed race people not to walk away from? might be other mixed-race people, whatever the mix. The response to the charge that those who identify as mixed race are walking away from their people could be that in joining with other mixed-race people, they are in fact expressing their sense of peoplehood. Without a sense of collective subjectivity among mixed-race people, however, there is no forging of new meaning, no social movement to push against the racial state in any way other than simply with a demand for rights already countenanced within liberal politics.

As Omi and Winant interpret the structure of the racial state, it is normally in a condition of "unstable equilibrium," and may be disequibrated by racially based social movements that challenge fundamental meanings of race, and these movements could be radical or conservative: "the disruption [of the unstable equilibrium] may take many shapes, for example the emergence of a mass-based racial movement such as took place in the 1960s, or of a powerful counter-egalitarian thrust such as appeared . . . in the 1980s (with the institutionalization of new right and neoconservative interpretations of race)" (Omi and Winant 1994, 85). When racial movements pressure the state through attempts to rearticulate the dominant racial ideology and to make racially significant structural changes, the state can recover from the resulting disequilibrium through what Omi and Winant call absorption and insulation:

Absorption reflects the realization that many demands are greater threats to the racial order before they are accepted than after they have been adopted in suitably moderate form. *Insulation* is a related process in which the state confines demands to terrains that are, if not entirely symbolic, at least not crucial to the operation of the racial order. (Omi and Winant 1994, 86–87)

It is possible that the mixed-race “movement” contains currents that will be met with absorption and insulation—for instance, adding the category “multiracial” to the Census and other public record-keeping documents could easily fit this description—and other currents that will lead to the creation of a strong sense of collective subjectivity and to further challenges to the racial state. This would be typical of the pattern described by Omi and Winant, in which after the racial state begins to shift in response to demands,

movements undergo internal divisions. A certain segment of the movement is absorbed (“coopted,” in 1960s parlance) along with its demands, into the state, and there constitutes the core staff and agenda of the new state programs or agencies with which reform policies are to be implemented. The remaining active segment of the movement is “radicalized,” while its more passive membership drops away to take up the roles and practices defined by a rearticulated racial ideology in the newly restabilized racial order. (Omi and Winant 1994, 87)

What, then, is or might be the radical, antiassimilationist thrust of the mixed-race movement? Is there evidence of a sense of collective subjectivity developing in ways that challenge the dominant racial order?

It is not clear to me to what degree a politicized collective identity for mixed-race people is becoming a part of the available racial understandings in the United States; writings by or interviews of mixed-race people reveal thoroughly mixed responses to the question of whether such a collective identity is even desirable let alone possible. I want to distinguish between on the one hand organizations of mixed-race people—and there are many such organizations and networks—and on the other hand a sense of collectivity at the level of identity and particularly at the level of a politicized identity. Many mixed-race people speak of a feeling of fellowship with other mixed-race people (although others adamantly deny feeling any sense of connection to mixed-race people as a distinct group) but in most cases this stays at the level of a recognition that there may be some common experiences.¹¹ Collective subjectivity, on the other hand, seems to require more than this if it is to give rise to a change in the racial order.

There are places related to the discourse on mixed race where there is a strong group identity that does work to create new racialized meanings. Perhaps the clearest example of a politicized collective subjectivity among a people who could be called “mixed” is that of mestizos/as, and it is interesting that for the most part those who identify with the term “mestizo/a” and who understand it as a politicized term seem *not* to identify with the

mixed-race movement.¹² The politics of *mestizaje* seem to differ in several significant ways from other discussions of mixed race.

The “mix” referred to in the term “mestizo/a” is a specific mix, though with plenty of variation encompassed by the term. It has been used by Latinos and Chicanos to refer to mixture with Anglos, but also by Latinos and especially by Chicanos to refer to their mixed Indian and Spanish and sometimes African ancestry. Although José Vasconcelos (1925) used the term to envision a future, universal, “cosmic race” that could potentially be reached if the existing races continue their mixing, the term still served to indicate and celebrate—at least temporarily—a specific identity characteristic of Mexicans (and Chicanos), since Vasconcelos saw the greatest potential in these populations for such mixing, and since the Chicano movement later adopted Vasconcelos as their own.¹³ Because there is a specificity to the term, the shared identity or collective subjectivity among mestizos rests on concrete cultural, historical, and linguistic ties, and often on explicit political loyalties, perhaps especially among those who identify as Chicano. It is a declaration of belonging and of loyalty to mestizos as a specific people. It is antiassimilationist in its maintenance of specific practices; having a mestizo identity is not a way of walking away from *la Raza*, but rather is a way—or perhaps *the way*—of being *Raza* (i.e., *la raza mestiza*). Writers who identify as mestizo/a often use this designation interchangeably with other terms: *Raza*, Chicano/a, Mexicano/a, and so on.¹⁴

Gloria Anzaldúa writes about the terms that designate her identity and she distinguishes between those terms that signify “copping out” and those that do not:

As a culture, we call ourselves Spanish when referring to ourselves as a linguistic group and when copping out. It is then that we forget our predominant Indian genes. . . . We call ourselves Hispanic or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish-speaking peoples of the Western hemisphere and when copping out. We call ourselves Mexican-American to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun “American” than the adjective “Mexican” (and when copping out). . . .

When not copping out . . . we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; *mestizo* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; *Raza* when referring to Chicanos; *tejanos* when we are Chicanos from Texas. (Anzaldúa 1987, 63)

Notice that “mestizo,” at least at present in the United States, does not have connotations of whitening or of being any less of-color than those designated by the other terms that do not signify copping out.¹⁵ The term “mestizo” simultaneously acknowledges mixture and allegiance to a people of color (and also recognizes the whole racialized group—Latinos and/or Chicanos—as a mixed people). It can express a singular loyalty to *la Raza* as a politically

motivated rejection of any white/Anglo heritage, as it does, for instance, for Cherríe Moraga, who writes:

I am that raging breed of mixed-blood person who writes to defend a culture that I know is being killed. I am of that endangered culture and of that murderous race, but I am loyal only to one. My mother culture, my mother tongue, further back than even she can remember. (Moraga 1993, 128–29)

Or, it can express a willingness to stand on the border and negotiate, to become, in Anzaldúa's words, "the officiating priestess at the crossroads" (Anzaldúa 1987, 80), without ever losing the specificity of a mestizo identity as something that defines *la Raza* rather than deserts it.

Linda Alcoff suggests that the idea of mestizo identity could be extended to any mixed-race mixture. She writes: "Mestizo consciousness is a double vision, a conscious articulation of mixed identity, allegiances, and traditions. . . . All forms of racial mixes could be included in this identity, thus avoiding the elaborate divisions that a proliferation of specific mixed identities could produce" (Alcoff 1995, 277). When I am optimistic, I agree with this statement and think that potentially there could be a specific collective subjectivity that would encompass all mixed-race people. However, I think that the "proliferation of specific mixed identities" (such as mestizo, or, for another example, hapa) does not just create divisions but, characterized positively, allows for a more concrete sense of a shared peoplehood and a specific inheritance to celebrate, transform, blend with other inheritances, and generally grapple with. It is not clear to me that there can be a sense of collective subjectivity without some specific shared practices, even if those practices are continually shifting, always under contestation, and inherited from multiple sources. Without a grounding of a collective subjectivity in something more than the shared experience of being mixed, it is not clear whether there is a sense of identity that can stand in opposition to assimilation. On the other hand, I think optimistically that new, mixed, antiassimilationist identities can be created and can jar the racial order with their impurity, though such new senses of identity might feel awkward and perhaps manufactured or artificial at first.

What does seem promising about mixed-race racial identification—and promising in terms of its antiracist potential—is that if there *can* be a sense of collective identity around mixed-race peoples, it is an identity that is impure. Since racism rests on notions of racial purity—white superiority is premised on white purity—one can challenge racism with the assertion that the process of racialization masks the impurity of the "races" that it creates. However, it is not clear that identifying as mixed race or multiracial does this, since one could read the introduction of a multiracial category as implying that all the other categories, in contrast to the multiracial category, are pure.¹⁶

It could be more accurate and more productive to emphasize the fact that all of the categories are social constructions and are not based in some pure biological essence. Many efforts are in fact made at showing how any

racial designation contains within it an incredible diversity of experiences, phenotypes, heritages, and so on. For example, Marlon Riggs's video, *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1995) portrays the identity "black" as analogous to a gumbo stew for which there are infinite recipes. Mixed-race people's insistence at inclusion in groups of color emphasizes the impurity of those groups.¹⁷

VII

As I contemplate my claim that collective subjectivity can and should be built where there is racial and cultural impurity, I come up against the complications of this position for myself. I have to acknowledge what makes it possible for me to take this antiassimilationist position, recognizing how lucky I am to live in a historical context in which I can afford to reject assimilation and passing and still stay alive being visible as a Jew. In the background is my knowledge that this is not always possible. My mother and her parents and grandparents attempted assimilation and passing—taken to the extreme of conversion to Christianity—in order to be accepted socially and professionally in Germany; it provided illusory safety since in Nazi Germany they were still classified as "non-Aryan" and had they not fled the country in 1938 they would have met the same fate as other Jews, a group with whom they denied identification. I grew up believing I was "mixed" (with a Jewish father and a Gentile mother) since my mother's lack of Jewish identity continued at least through my childhood, during which time she did not tell me of her mostly Jewish heritage, something I discovered only as a young adult.

I think about my mother's response to "mixed" heritage—and here I will even call it mixed race since in the relevant time period in Germany Jews were a racial group. When I raise with her the issue of her Jewish heritage she repeats the story of her one Gentile grandparent, her mother's biological father who, in my mother's words, was "Catholic, homosexual, and committed suicide" when my mother's mother was very young; she tells me tales of German Christmases as evidence that really, the family was not Jewish; that really, she was not Jewish, is not Jewish. In my mind, none of this makes her—or myself—not Jewish; instead, it makes Jewishness something impure.

I form this response, this insistence on being Jewish, in part with Adrienne Rich's story about betrayal standing in my mind as a cautionary tale, with Naomi Scheman's words coming back to me—"it is a matter of honor not to walk away from the people with whom history has given me 'a shared fate'"—along with my knowledge of how my mother's fate was tied so seriously to that of Jews. Cherríe Moraga's words come back to me too, and I imagine speaking them myself, though I must borrow them from her context to apply them to mine: "I am of that endangered culture and of that murderous race, but I am loyal only to one." My loyalty to Jews—that is, my insistence on sharing in the collective subjectivity of Jews (something I took a long time to arrive at) and my hope not to ever be put in a position of choosing to walk away—constructs the group *as* impure, and least of all because of any mixing that I can point to by counting great grandparents.

Many of the mixed-race racial theorists are indeed interested in challenging notions of racial purity, but this seems to lead them away from the formation of group identity or collective subjectivity, as if such collectivity required purity. Their emphasis on recognizing the unique identity of each individual mixed-race person is set at odds with the development or celebration of a concrete, shared identity. I would suggest contrary to this that collective subjectivity and the celebration of racial and cultural impurity are consistent and that in fact there can be a collective creation of impure identities, something that is demonstrated by discussions of *mestizaje*, which often emphasize the collective rather than individual character of "mixed" racial and cultural identification while simultaneously celebrating impurity. Such work has been important to me for understanding my own position. These discussions of *mestizaje* differ significantly from (other) mixed-race racial theory; they suggest possible ways for mixed-race/mestizo identification to create and reinforce collective subjectivities in ways that individual acts of mixed-race racial self-identification do not as long as they signify walking away from a collective of-color identity or away from solidarity with other peoples of color.

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Notes

¹Other theoretical work on mixed race includes chapters in Frankenberg 1993; Gordon 1995; chapters in Jones 1994; selections from Thompson and Tyagi 1996; and Zack 1993. Many of the above sources also include autobiographical pieces. A collection of interviews of mixed-race people can be found in Funderburg 1994. A popular autobiographical novel about mixed racial heritage is Haizlip 1994. Periodicals devoted to mixed-race people include *Interrace*, *NewPeople*, and *Biracial Child*. The organizations mentioned include the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally); a much longer listing of smaller organizations can be found in Brown and Douglass 1996.

²The question of how race data will be collected on the year 2000 Census is currently under consideration. The federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) recommended on July 8, 1997, a change from using "check one box only" to "check all that apply" on the Census and other federal forms. Project RACE objects that this change is not sufficient, because there will still be no box marked "multiracial." Interestingly, Newt Gingrich strongly supports including a "multiracial" category, and in general, Republicans are tending to support the addition of a "multiracial" category and Democrats are tending to oppose it. At the May 1997 hearing on the federal categories for race and ethnicity, the "minority Census groups" unanimously voted against the inclusion of a "multiracial" category (Project RACE website [<http://projectrace.home.mindspring.com>], Sept. 1997). See also "'Multiracial' designation" 1997.

³The phrase is taken from Zack's claim that there is no such thing outside of the life of the mind (Zack 1995b, 298).

- ⁴Zack writes: "It has been estimated that between 75 percent and 90 percent of all African Americans have some white ancestry. Within this group, the group likely to self-identify as mixed race is probably no more than 10 percent or 15 percent" (Zack 1995c, 125). She cites Joel Williamson, *New People* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 9–16, 125.
- ⁵See, for instance, Root 1996b, in which about a quarter of the pieces are prefaced with an anecdote about some version of the "what are you?" encounters. Similar anecdotes are given by many of the people interviewed by Funderburg (1994). Lisa Jones (1994) also begins one of her essays ("Is Biracial Enough? [Or, What's This About a Multi-racial Category on the Census? A Conversation]") with a listing of some variations on the "what are you?" question.
- ⁶The very unchosenness of Jewish identity is, as Scheman argues elsewhere, important to Jewishness itself: "Christian normativity tends to make the natal ascription of identity unintelligible. Abstract individualism, a distinctively Christian view of persons, views group identity as properly a matter of choice, and as subordinate to one's unmarked humanity in constituting identity. . . . Part of the difficulty involved in thinking about Jewishness is acknowledging the importance of history, along with group identity. . . . The denial of the relevance of the body and of history . . . also seems to me to be both masculinist and Christian, insofar as both those discourses privilege the mind over the body, the chosen over the given. . . . To speak of Jewishness as paradigmatically unchosen has, of course, an additional resonance, since to be Jewish is to be 'chosen'" (Scheman 1997, 142–43). Resisting assimilation of Jewishness into a Christian paradigm calls for claiming a Jewish identity *as* something unchosen: "It is important, I think, to assert Jewishness specifically as an identity that is paradigmatically not a matter of choice—that is, to resist not only the assimilation of individual Jews into Christian culture but the assimilation of Jewish identity itself" (Scheman 1997, 151–52).
- ⁷Scheman cites Evelyn Torton Beck, "Naming is not a simple act," in Christie Balka and Andy Rose (eds.), *Twice Blessed* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 175, for the phrase "a shared fate."
- ⁸In fact, for Jews it is a matter of honor not only not to walk away from Jews, but also not to walk away from any oppressed people; Scheman argues that Jews should think of our own fate as tied to the fate of all oppressed people. She writes, "Jews are, over the long run, a good test of the oppressiveness of a social environment (at least in those parts of the world where Jews have historically lived). Sooner or later those who are committed to ideologies of domination and subordination will reveal themselves as anti-Semites. . . . Thus, the quintessentially Jewish injunction that 'none is free so long as any are oppressed' is for Jews a literal truth, no matter how hard individuals or groups may work at denying it, whether by assimilating within a Christian culture or by militarizing the state of Israel" (Scheman 1997, 143).
- ⁹See, for instance, Lewis Gordon's claim that even if mixed-race identification is a rejection of a white identity, it does not resist the racist belief that one should at all costs avoid being black. He writes: "To reject the importance of being white in no way addresses the social revulsion with being black" (Gordon 1995, 392).
- ¹⁰The Baldwin piece was brought to my attention by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz's use of it (1992).
- ¹¹See, for instance, the juxtaposed quotations from interviews on p. 319 of Funderburg 1994. For additional mixed responses, see also Nakashima 1996, Weisman 1996, and King and DaCosta 1996.
- ¹²Linda Alcoff's work, which I will discuss below, is an exception to this. See Alcoff 1995.
- ¹³For a discussion of the Chicano movement's relation to Vasconcelos, see Didier T. Jaén's (1997) introduction to Vasconcelos' *La Raza Cósmica* (*The Cosmic Race*).
- ¹⁴María Lugones speaks of "Chicano" as "the name for the curdled or mestizo person"—someone who can be multiple without being fragmented—and contrasts this with the split person designated as "mexican/american," a term that Lugones writes without the usual hyphen, in order "to signify that if the split were successful there would be no possibility of dwelling or living on the hyphen" (Lugones 1994, 470; she

credits Sonia Saldívar-Hull with the expression “living on the hyphen”; Panel discussion, “Cultural Identity and the Academy,” tenth annual Interdisciplinary Forum of the Western Humanities Conference on Cultures and Nationalism, University of California, Los Angeles). “Mixed-race” (whose hyphen perhaps also falsely promises a place of hybrid collective subjectivity) may indicate a splitting in some respects similar to the “mexican/american”; the Chicano or mestizo, in contrast, is hybrid without being split by the demands of distinct, homogenous groups (such as black/white, mexican/american). As Lugones writes, “groups in a genuinely heterogeneous society have complex, nonfragmented persons as members, that is, they are heterogeneous themselves. The affiliative histories include the formation of voices in contestation that reveal the enmeshing of race, gender, culture, class, and other differences that affect and constitute the identity of the group’s members” (Lugones 1994, 475).

¹⁵ Contrast this with the case of Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, where to be mixed (e.g., “Ladino”) is to have a higher status than to be *indígena*. Thanks to Naomi Scheman for drawing attention to this (in comments on an earlier draft).

¹⁶ See, for instance, David Theo Goldberg, who writes that “‘mixed-race’ . . . naturalizes racial assumption, marking mixed-ness as an aberrant condition, as transgressive, and at the extreme as purity polluting” (Goldberg 1995, 243).

¹⁷ See also Lugones 1994.

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