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MIXED-RACE

Jared Sexton

Under the best of circumstances, mixed race identity can provide a useful optic on power, a privileged standpoint from which important aspects of social relations can be absorbed, analyzed, and understood.

—George Lipsitz, “Noises in the Blood”

To write about mixed-race, however designated, is above all to address questions of power. It is to come to terms with power’s emergence and operation at various scales, in different registers, and through multiple forms in the production, sorting, and grouping of populations in vertical array. It is to think about the collective organization and deployment of violence, the political economy of goods and services, and the libidinal economy of pleasure and pain; and it is about the symbolic order and semiotic activity that together describe, explain, motivate, and justify these elements and aspects of social formation. To broach the matter of mixed-race without articulating the discourse in terms of such *situatedness* is to evade the issues of greatest import and, through that evasion, to de-historicize and de-politicize the history and politics responsible for the suffering exacted in its name.

The rise of multiracialism in the post–civil rights era United States has been characterized especially, but not exclusively, by a general evasion of these considerations. This is not to say that scholars in the academic field of multiracial studies and activists involved with the multiracial movement since the 1980s have not understood their collective endeavor to be, among other things, a reckoning with historical dynamics and political realities. Indeed, the discourse of multiracialism has, across two generations now, claimed to *intervene* upon the history and politics of race and racism in the United States and beyond, and, furthermore, to intervene against the purported *exceptionality* of a racial order unlike any other in the world and defined by the most extreme standard of classification: the one-drop rule of hypo-descent.

Hypo-descent is a concept coined by the anthropologist Marvin Harris (distinguished for his quasi-Marxist theory and method of “cultural materialism”) in his 1964 *Patterns of Race in the Americas*. There, Harris writes:

In the United States, the mechanism employed is the rule of hypo-descent. This descent rule requires Americans to believe that anyone who is known to have had a Negro ancestor is a Negro. We admit nothing in between. . . . “Hypo-descent”

means affiliation with the subordinate rather than the superordinate group in order to avoid the ambiguity of intermediate identity.

(quoted in Jordan 2014: 120n12)

Crucially, for Harris, the avoidance of “intermediate identity” does not represent, as it were, an inherent and necessary aversion to ambiguity among the architects of racialization, such that any departure from hypodescent thereby undermines this fundament of the social order. Rather, as he makes clear throughout his comparative study, the rules of racial definition of a given society, or region, are driven by largely strategic considerations. Kalvero Olberg, then a senior research associate at Cornell University and best known for introducing the concept of “culture shock” to a general audience, summarized Harris’s position in a review for *American Anthropologist*:

The definition of race in the Americas, the author states, has little or nothing to do with race as defined by the physical anthropologist. While physical traits play a part, race classifications are in terms of economic, political, and social realities. The author makes a telling point by showing that discrimination is not the result of race prejudice but the other way around. As color prejudice is shared by the members of racially mixed groups, this can scarcely be considered a cause of discrimination. When a superordinate group wishes to hold another group in subjection through full scale economic, social, and political discrimination, a body of beliefs and attitudes prejudicial to the members of this group is invented to support discriminatory practices.

(Olberg 1965: 797)

What Olberg highlights in Harris’s work is a political, or political economic, conception of the rules of racial definition rooted in large-scale historical developments and bearing little or no motive relation to “physical traits” or what Harris, in turn, calls “biological facts.” The important point not to be missed here, however, is that Harris does not offer an evaluation in preference of hypo- or hyper-descent (or, for that matter, cognatic-descent) rules of definition. Rather, he attempts to describe their operation and analyze their causes and consequences. What he finds, in a concise survey of the Americas, is that hierarchical social orders have been established and continue to be maintained *across* the relative permeability of racial borders or proliferation of racial categories. Polarities of hierarchy accommodate greater or lesser degrees of contact.

Duana Fullwiley aptly illustrates the point in a 2008 interview for *Harvard Magazine*. A medical anthropologist at Stanford, she is discussing fieldwork conducted on sickle-cell disease in Senegal for her critically acclaimed book (Fullwiley 2011) when she remarks:

I am an African American . . . but in parts of Africa, I am white. . . . I take a plane to France, a seven- to eight-hour ride. My race changes as I cross the Atlantic. There, I say, “*Je suis noire*,” and they say, “Oh, okay—*métisse*—you are mixed.” Then I fly another six to seven hours to Senegal, and I am white. In the space of a day, I can change from African American, to *métisse*, to *tubaab* [Wolof for “white/European”].

Crucially, she adds: “This is not a joke, or something to laugh at, or to take lightly. It is the kind of social recognition that even two-year-olds who can barely speak understand” (Rosenberg 2008). Fullwiley does not share this anecdote in order to delight in the contingency of rules of racial definition or to suggest the absurdity of US racialization in particular. Rather, in revealing how apparent ambiguity results in differing and divergent racial designations in transit from North America to Europe to Africa, she demonstrates that the relative meanings and values attached to whiteness and blackness and their admixture are not upended simply because those meanings and values are differently assigned to different bodies in different geographic settings. In other words, she may be considered African American, or black, in the United States, *métisse*, or mixed, in France, and *tubaab*, or white, in Senegal; but her migration across categories does nothing to alter the status and function of those categories. “Black,” “mixed,” and “white” continue to name positions in and as hierarchy.

We are not saying anything particularly new here, but it bears repeating in light of the resurgent interest in multiracialism following the 2008 election of US President Barack Obama (Carter 2013; Elam 2010; DaCosta 2008; Hochschild, Weaver and Burch 2012). I attempted a similar argument in my earlier study of the phenomenon (Sexton 2008), where I drew, in part, upon interdisciplinary research in Latin American studies to contradict a powerful tendency in the United States to view ideologies and practices of *mestizaje*, *mestiçagem*, or *metissage* as propaedeutic. The subsequent scholarly literature on that score has only deepened and reinforced the critique (Andrews 2010; Cottrol 2013; Gates 2011; Hernández 2012; Nascimento 2007; Nobles 2005; Sue 2013; Telles 2014; Telles and Sue 2009; Vargas 2010; Wade 2004; Wade et al. 2014). What we see presently are broad countervailing regional trends toward increasing color-blindness in North America, convergent with the rise of the New Right and popular conservatism in US and Canadian politics (Farney and Rayside 2007; Thompson 2007), and increasing color-consciousness in Central and South America, where movements among Afro-Latinos and indigenous peoples have pushed against official discourses of racial democracy and, alongside popular resistance to neoliberal globalization, for fundamental changes in law and policy (Rahier 2012; Rice 2012; Silva 2009; Webber and Carr 2013). Something similar can be said about comparative studies of mixed-race in Europe, in the larger Atlantic world, and even at the global scale (Haritaworn 2012; King-O’Riain et al. 2014; McNeil 2009; Song 2012). So, while the *fin de siècle* announcement of multiracialism has reshaped policy debates in the United States and elsewhere from census counting to student services to public health, one would be hard-pressed to conclude that its effect has been salutary, if one is interested primarily in social justice (Sundstrom 2008). This is especially the case as the new biological sciences—from genomics to bioinformatics—have, in public-private partnership with state and capital, served to “re-create race in the twenty-first century” (Roberts 2013; see also Bliss 2012; Happe 2013; Kahn 2013; Koenig, Lee and Richardson 2008; Morning 2011; Philips, Odunlami and Bonham 2007; Reardon 2009; Wailoo, Nelson and Lee 2012).

A 2015 symposium at NYU’s Asian Pacific American Institute helped to concentrate our collective effort by asking: “What’s Radical About ‘Mixed Race’?” Not, what is interesting or distracting, comforting, or disturbing, but rather what is the relation of mixed-race to radicalism in general and to radical traditions in particular? On the one hand, we could say there is nothing radical about mixed-race, if we assume that

such radicality stems from the novelty of the matter or the discourse that nominates it. As a point of reference we have, for instance, Hortense Spillers's (2011) observation, in a terse commentary titled "Mama's Baby, Papa's Too," responding to the 2011 *New York Times* "Race Remixed" series spearheaded by Susan Saulny, now a national correspondent for ABC News. The yearlong series set out to "explore the growing number of mixed-race Americans" and reported, among other things, that mixed-race people, especially those attending college, "use the strength in their growing numbers to affirm roots that were once portrayed as tragic or pitiable" while "leading a sea of change in how we think about race and ethnicity." In her commentary Spillers writes that, contrary to the upbeat breaking news rhetoric of the publication of record, "racial ambiguity is . . . a new-world thematic—probably about seven centuries old by now." For those doing the math, that takes us back to something approaching the fourteenth century CE and to an examination of the social, political, and economic developments unfolding in historical outline within and between Africa, Asia, and Europe. As there is not yet anything but speculation about the existence of the Americas in this hub of early global encounter, we see that the racial thematics of the "new world" begin in and as transformations well prior to the Columbian advent.

Three massive shifts deserve mention in this respect. First, the shift in the principal vector of trade in enslaved Africans, from the trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean basin toward the newer transatlantic circuit—what historian Patrick Manning (1990) calls, respectively, the "Oriental" and "Occidental" slave trades—whose pivot entailed an intensification of the internal slave trade throughout most of the African continent. It is crucial to note that the transatlantic Occidental slave trade launched its maritime enterprise along a North-South axis, centered about the Mediterranean region, in the fifteenth century, well before European imperial expansion to the Americas (Green 2012; Hunwick and Powell 2002; Segal 2001). Second, the related shift in mode of production from feudalism toward mercantilism in Europe, including the systematic enclosure of the commons so crucial to the incipient stage of capitalism in the early modern period (Solow 2014; Wood 2002). Third, the stirrings of Renaissance humanism throughout European intellectual life, unleashing historical, philosophical, theological, and scientific debates that would reconfigure long-standing notions of slavery and freedom for the subsequent formulation and eventual consolidation of the idea and practice of racial differentiation (Brotton 2006; Goldenberg 2005; Isaac 2004). We thus begin to understand, following the lead of Elizabeth Donnan's four-volume documentary history of the transatlantic slave trade, whose landmark research Spillers consults in the course of writing her most famous essay, that by the mid-1400s at least "the magic of skin color is already installed as a decisive factor in human dealings" (Spillers 2003: 212). In this zone of convergence—where the European's relation to the African is mediated by long-standing relations with the Arab and Berber peoples of the Maghreb—slavery as a legal, political, and economic institution becomes progressively *circumscribed* to the populations of sub-Saharan West and Central Africa and *racialized* as black and, concomitantly, the status of the enslaved is *degraded* relative to its pre-modern and ancient variants across most of the inhabited world (Black 2015; Blackburn 1997; Lovejoy 2012). "Slavery," as Toby Green notes, "has been a universal human institution and remains widespread, but Atlantic slavery holds *an unusual importance* for thinking about modernity, foreshadowing as it did racial consciousness and the industrialization of global economies" (2012: 4, emphasis added).

On the other hand, there is nothing more radical than mixed-race, provided we approach the questions it raises *in the abstract*. Rainier Spencer has argued this point since the late 1990s, notably in his *Spurious Issues* (1999), where he writes: “the multiracial idea, considered in the abstract, can possess a measure of subversive power” (168), it “can invalidate race and then of necessity itself” (126). Insofar as it becomes a term of social identity, however, it “would have precisely the opposite effect” (126). Thomas Holt (2004) suggested as much more recently in his contribution to the American Anthropology Association’s public education project “Understanding Race and Human Variation,” funded by the National Science Foundation and the Ford Foundation. For Holt,

[The] very possibility of the mixture of races frames—indeed has always framed—the larger problematic of race as such. That [theoretical] possibility forms one of its essential components, at once enabling and destabilizing racial thought and racial regimes. All of the things taken for granted about race are brought into question when races [ostensibly] mix—not least of them the physical-biological reality of race itself (i.e., what is race?); as well as whether and to what extent race is best understood as biology or culture; and, indeed, what motivates racism (i.e., the relation between racial identification and racism).
(2004: 2)

The Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) association and its academic journal stand in *prima facie* agreement. The official website describes the project as “the transracial, transdisciplinary, and transnational critical analysis of the institutionalization of social, cultural, and political orders based on dominant conceptions of race.” But that analysis is hamstrung by the assumption that emphasizing “the *mutability* of race and the *porosity* of racial boundaries” ensures the “critique of local and global . . . injustices rooted in systems of racialization.” That is to say, it assumes that dominant conceptions of race do not already acknowledge—when they do not emphasize and employ—“the mutability of race and the porosity of racial boundaries” to institutionalize unjust social, cultural, and political orders. It assumes, more importantly, that what is most important about a racial order is the relative mutability or porosity of its boundaries rather than the structural violence of “permanent group hierarchy” (Fredrickson 2002: 6).

That the idea of mixed-race raises questions about the larger problematic of race as such does not guarantee that those questions will be posed in the most adequate way or, moreover, that they will not solicit a reactionary quest for resolution. What I have referred to as “racial suture” (2008: 18–26) can, and often enough does, give rise to a rage for order that closes down thinking in the name of a certain knowledge. In fact, it would seem that regimes of racialization have always worked with and through mutability and porosity, through figures of mixture as much as through figures of purity. Borrowing from psychiatrists Maurice Dide and Paul Guiraud (Magin-Lazarus 1995), Fanon described this phenomenon at midcentury as the fluid metaphysics of the “delirious Manicheanism” of race. In the last generation, one might revisit works ranging from Spiller’s (2003) “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor” (addressing the idea-forms of the “mulatto/a” in the post-Reconstruction era literature of racial passing, originally published in 1987) to Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire* (1995) (addressing the mixed-race obsessions of purportedly anti-miscegenationist Anglo-Saxons in pursuit of global

empire) to Teresa Zackodnik's *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (2004) (addressing the ingenious uses to which black women creative writers have put the figures of mixed-race in a deconstruction of the patriarchal anti-blackness of slavery and segregation) to Daniel Sharfstein's *The Invisible Line* (2011) (addressing the mythology of the one-drop rule as a component of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century US racial order). An extended quote from Sharfstein suffices to sharpen the focus:

Ideologies of racial purity and pollution are as old as America, and so is interracial mixing. Yet the one-drop rule did not, as many have suggested, make all mixed-race people black. From the beginning, African Americans assimilated into white communities across the South. Often, becoming white did not require the deception normally associated with racial "passing"; whites knew that certain people were different and let them cross the color line anyway. These communities were not islands of racial tolerance. They could be as committed to slavery, segregation, and white supremacy as anywhere else, and so could their newest members—it was one of the things that made them white. The history of the color line is one in which people have lived quite comfortably with contradiction.

(Sharfstein 2007: 594)

Commitment to slavery, not judgments of appearance or lineage, as "one of the things that made them white": is there not a structural homology today in the (active or passive) commitment to hyper-segregation, disciplinary welfare, punitive schooling, police profiling, and mass imprisonment, or to the menu of ideological accompaniments to the ongoing repression of black freedom movement? "White" no longer means the same thing post-civil rights, of course, or rather, the same thing no longer means simply "white." But, as Sharfstein cautions, whiteness as the historical formation of an internally differentiated social category should not be hypostasized. There are other possibilities afoot as what Charles Gallagher (2004) terms "racial redistricting" expands the boundaries of whiteness in our time, while lending ever-greater salience to any and every indication of non-blackness (Lee and Bean 2007; Yancey 2003).

Spillers, then, pushes us to this consideration: "[To] call oneself mixed-race, or black and white, or something and something else, means *what?* What work is that supposed to do for you?" Her reply is astute:

We very much doubt that the fury here is that there are not enough boxes on the census form, or a deficit of classificatory items, or the prohibition to check more than one, or even the thwarted desire to express racial pride, but, rather, the dictates of a muted self-interest that wishes to carve its own material and political successes out of another's hide. . . . In other words, if "racial ambiguity" or *looking* that way, can be amplified and translated into a legitimate *political* interest (as it is increasingly becoming a *commercial* one), then the padded new racism that comes about as a result will gladly declare a new class of winners.

One must keep in mind that these are not observations made from lack of charity or broad learning, as too many defenders of multiracialism presume when fielding criticism from black scholars. I think that the "self-interest" Spillers infers here is muted not

only for the audience that is expected to hear the multiracial claim but for the one who utters it as well. That is to say the differentiation and distancing at work in the articulation of mixed-race may be driven by sources, aims, and objects that remain obscure even, or especially, to the *subject* of multiracialism. This obscurity would be essential to sustaining the leaps of logic required to massage or manage the unavoidable contradictions, to deflect otherwise pressing questions, and to bring the multiracial claim, and its cohorts, into a sort of coherence.

Most acutely, there is philosopher Lewis Gordon, who 20 years ago, between the publication of several canonical anthologies edited by psychologist Maria Root (1992, 1996) and philosopher Naomi Zack (1993), raised the bar, or threw down the gauntlet, in his 1995 *Social Identities* article, “Critical ‘Mixed Race’?” In this article, as well as in his *Existential Africana* (2000), Gordon commented at length on the foundational work of Zack (1993), whose first book remains the standard introduction to the issues at hand and the only sustained philosophical meditation on mixed-race until Ronald Sundstrom’s *The Browning of America and the Evasion of Social Justice* (2008). Gordon’s contention—“there is no way to reject the thesis that there is something wrong with being black beyond the willingness to ‘be’ black”—is derived from his extensive engagement with Fanon’s thought on the power and pervasiveness of anti-blackness, or “negrophobogenesis.” Nevertheless, Gordon’s arguments have hardly been addressed, let alone persuasively challenged, within the subsequent literature on multiracialism. Neither has Gordon’s corollary call for a *critical* mixed-race theory that operates by way of a “suicidal irony” in ethical pursuit of what he terms “a blackened world,” about which more in a moment. Instead, multiracial studies or its rebranding as CMRS proceeds, in the main, as if the article and its follow-up (Gordon 2000) were never published, to say nothing of the larger body of work of which it is a part. Gordon’s many books and articles on the concept of the anti-black world represent elements of a cogent and far-reaching critique of the political *impetus* or *impulse* behind the emergence of multiracialism in the historic instance, including the work of David Brunnsma (2005), Kimberly DaCosta (2007), Heather Dalmage (2004), Angelique Davis (2007), Michelle Elam (2011), David Hollinger (2005), Ralina Joseph (2013), Minelle Mahtani (2012), Minkah Makalani (2003), Melissa Nobles (2000, 2005), Rainier Spencer (2006, 2011), Kim Williams (2005, 2008), and many more. These scholars represent a countercurrent to the mainstream of CMRS and, as to be expected, such currents mingle at points, generating still underexplored eddies and vortices (McKibben 2014).

At this point, we might ask, in a Fanonian register, does this leave multiracialism with no viable option but “to turn black or disappear?” Is this really the price, as it were, of being ethical in an anti-black world? Is this not just another enforcement of hypo-descent from below, the much-decried bane of the multiracial experience? The charge is spurious (in the sense that it appears to be but is not actually valid), but it has its purposes. If I might be indulged a brief reply to critics in hopes that is it illustrative of a more general procedure, I will recall that *Amalgamation Schemes* was first reviewed some years ago in a special issue of *The Black Scholar* (Nishime 2009). Amid a hurried appraisal, the reviewer gets something right, albeit for the wrong reason, when claiming that the book “sets up a tautology where multiracial studies is defined as anti-black and if it is not anti-black then it is not multiracial studies.” The judgment is hasty, not least because I am interested in the broader phenomenon of *multiracialism*, “inclusive of the political initiatives of the multiracial movement, the academic field of multiracial

studies, and the media discourse about ‘race mixture’ in contemporary culture and society” (2008: 1). I might continue defining multiracial studies as axiomatically anti-black, which is to say at the level of its guiding assumptions and premises, if that is as plainly as the point needs to be made for fulsome discussion and debate to happen. Rather, one might better say, as I attempted in the earlier book, that anti-blackness is irreducible for the formation of *any* instance of multiracialism, academic or otherwise, and insist, moreover, that anti-blackness is not nearly as transparent a concept as one might think. The curious fact is that the review uses the notion of tautology to accuse the critique of multiracialism of a definitional police operation: “if it is not anti-black then it is not multiracial studies.” If we unpack the triple negative, then the charge might sound like this: *there is no such thing as pro-black multiracial studies*.

In other words, the reviewer finds this particular black scholar, not unlike many fellow critics, refuses to recognize multiracial friends and allies due to a too black assumption that, if one identifies as black, then one has no multiracial friends and allies by definition. In this self-enclosed racial paranoia, the fantasy of global persecution prevents the black-identified from accepting multiracial acceptance and much-needed coalition as well, but it also, tragically, prevents one from recognizing the lives of others. In academic circles, the diagnosis is “failure to conduct sufficient research” and the prescription for recommended reading involves recourse to supposedly better titles in multiracial studies and adjacent fields where illumination and reassurance await. Uncanny advice, for the main criticism on offer is that the sample is not representative (despite some 70 pages of notes and works cited). In this, the initial review is paradigmatic of the text’s larger critical reception (Comer 2012; Spickard 2009; Wachter-Grene 2011; cf. Cantanese 2011). None establishes (though at least one asserts) any misreading or misunderstanding of the primary and secondary sources under consideration and none claims the argument is unsound *as far as it goes*. The problem, rather, is that the critique of multiracialism takes aim at a “couple of not-very-thoughtful activists” and “weaker writers . . . tangential to the multiracial literature,” and that when it does address leading figures it “cherry-picks . . . evidence,” and so on (Spickard 2009). More telling is the objection that the critique leaves multiracialism “nowhere” to go, which is to say it is a *critique* and not a friendly reminder or a note of caution. The anxiety accompanying the reading, then, is about the parameters of a general implication: “We are not *all* like that and those of us that are aren’t *that* bad.” Such responses misrecognize the distinction between, say, a discourse analysis and a social or political psychology, much less a psychologizing or moralistic character judgment (Cuéllar 2010; Paltridge 2012; Parker and Cuéllar 2014). They express a collective concern about where to cut the border, where to draw the line, and how to maintain it, how to say who is and who is not, who’s in and who’s out. This is not an empirical problem regarding the breadth of the literature review or the diligence or fairness of the criticism, however, but a structural problem regarding the disavowed logic, or what Fanon would call the affective “pre-logic,” of an entire discursive formation. In fact, this is precisely the argument developed in chapter 3 of *Amalgamation Schemes* and one is only mildly surprised to see it replicated at a remove, since the reviewers participate in the discourse under examination. To wit: “Unable to produce an absolute refutation of the charges levied against it—as if that were the point—multiracialism instead celebrates the arrival of a critical mass or the achievement of safe distance” (Sexton 2008: 170).

What I am saying, in short, is a pro-black multiracial studies, one “that is not anti-black,” a genuinely *critical* mixed-race studies oriented by a suicidal irony, would be nothing other than an aspect of black studies itself; and multiracialism, by extension, an aspect of black freedom movement more generally. Far from setting up a tautology for those investigating the politics of mixed-race, we are referencing a *heuristic* that gives the lie to that line of demarcation drawn, loud and uncertain at present, between CMRS and the field of black studies it is meant to enlist and enlighten. Against the compulsive ascription of “a kind of parochialism in the discourse of African Americans in the United States” (Chandler 2006: 42) on matters of mixed-race, we might affirmatively describe and promote black studies as that open secret whose object is the radical “critique of western civilization” and whose aim is to extend and deepen *everyone’s* “critical and imaginative relation to the terms *abolition* and *reconstruction*” (Moten 2008: 1745).

Indeed, such work is already intimated, for instance, in the writings of sociologist Kimberly DaCosta and literary critic Michelle Elam. DaCosta (2008) spoke to the question of Barack Obama’s racial designation for the BBC News during the US presidential election season of 2008. In surveying the range of positions in response to queries about whether Obama is black or mixed-race, DaCosta writes:

[The] question whether Obama is black or mixed-race reflects a basic misunderstanding of the experience of those of us who have grown up in interracial families, particularly those of us of African descent, born in the post-Civil Rights period. It was in our families where we first felt love and protection as well as the first sting of racial prejudice. And many of us forged a black identity, *one that was not at odds with being mixed-race*, but arose out of our experiences as mixed people: from an awareness that the racial dilemma we were born into has its deepest roots in anti-black prejudice. For us, being black and mixed-race are not mutually exclusive.

(emphasis added)

Elam (2010), in a similar vein, addressed the question of multiracial identification in a piece for the *Huffington Post* on the occasion of the 2010 decennial census. She enjoined an erstwhile multiracial constituency to consider the (unintended) political effects of their forms of official public identification and suggested that there are “better venues in which to both represent our multisplendored selves and more productively ally with social justice efforts.” The both/and logic of DaCosta’s and Elam’s public commentaries represent a profound challenge to the politics of multiracialism insofar as it displaces the presumed conflict between black and multiracial, but does so by at once cancelling and retaining the difference.

The strategy is akin to that established in Stuart Hall’s well-known essay, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” His reading of that essay opened a three-day symposium on black popular culture convened by Michelle Wallace in 1991 at The Studio Museum of Harlem and the Dia Center of the Arts. Hall’s contribution appeared shortly thereafter in the panoramic 1992 *Black Popular Culture* anthology edited by Gina Dent for the Dia Art Foundation’s award-winning Discussions in Contemporary Culture book series and it has since been reprinted at least a half dozen times. Hall spoke most famously on that historic occasion about what he termed “the end of innocence of

the black subject or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” (Hall 1996: 447). The phrase was meant to indicate the “plurality of antagonisms and differences that now seek to destroy the unity of black politics, given the complexities of the structures of subordination that have been formed by the way in which we were inserted into the black diaspora” (Hall 1996: 447). Hall, of course, does not lament this development, but rather celebrates the possibilities of a disunited black politics, so to speak, a politics expansive and multidimensional enough to accommodate the “continuous [dislocation] of one identity by another, one structure by another” (Hall 1996: 447).

The spirit of Hall’s “conjunctural” politics is taken up at great length in Tommie Shelby’s 2005 book, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, a work that advances a post-nationalist conception of black solidarity that is transnational, feminist, queer, and socialist at least, wherein “black interests are not limited to racial justice but also include any progressive agenda that a group of blacks attempts to advance *qua* black people” (Shelby 2005: 158). This revised and expanded conception of black solidarity is enabled by a pivot away from a notion of blackness as collective identity and toward a notion of blackness as common oppression and commitment to resisting it. He adds, with respect to the notion of black identity, that “from the standpoint of black solidarity, each should be allowed, without molestation, to interpret ‘blackness’ however she or he sees fit (provided the interpretation does not advocate anything immoral and is consistent with the principles and goals of antiracism)” (Shelby 2002: 254). So much goes for the question of multiraciality as well, where one might thus articulate blackness with or within a claim to mixed-race heritage or identity without contradiction. Black and multiracial without contradiction or compromise, “provided the interpretation [of blackness] . . . is consistent with the principles and goals of antiracism.” That’s the rub, then, the central point of contention. This is not a politics of authenticity giving rise to litmus tests, enforcing codes of silence and invisibility on identity formations considered impure, wayward, illegitimate, and so on. Rather, it is a politics of solidarity in which the terms of debate regard the nature and direction of political struggle.

I take up the matter of mixed-race in the present chapter from this particular angle—rather than trying to provide an omnibus account—because I come to the questions raised therein by way of intramural debates about the disunited black politics Hall diagnosed and about the vexed political coalitions attendant to “the browning of America” post-civil rights. My comments here represent an attempt to understand a convergence of historical developments that often enough lack a strong critical sensibility. This blunted critical sensibility can even be found among progressive historians like the late Peggy Pascoe, whose award-winning and definitive study of the legal regulation of interracial marriage in the United States, *What Comes Naturally*, conflates overlapping circumstances with shared structural positioning while seeking to prove that “miscegenation law was a national—and multiracial—project” (Pascoe 2009: 14). While Pascoe correctly notes that “miscegenation law was clearly a project of white supremacy rooted in notions of white purity” and, further, that it was “written to prohibit Whites from marrying Blacks, Asian Americans, and Indians but not to prohibit Blacks from marrying Asian Americans, or Asian Americans from marrying Indians”; there is no need to conclude thereby that “the structure of the laws was an attempt to place non-Whites in *structurally similar* subordination to Whites, as if all non-Whites inhabited *the same social world* and embodied *the same threat* to whiteness” (Pascoe 2009: 8, emphasis

added). One could raise the immediate objection that Blacks, Asian Americans, and Indians were considered to pose *different* and perhaps even *differential* threats to whiteness—quantitatively or qualitatively—but that *all* such threats were sufficient to warrant prohibition. On that note, Pascoe’s research demonstrates clearly that while Blacks were not the *only* target of miscegenation law (i.e., the law’s reach was national and multiracial), they were never *not* the target of such legal bans, regardless of demographic variations from state to state. The regulation of Asian Americans and Indians, by contrast, was regionally specific and in some cases made provisions their allowance (even if such provisions were unjust and pursuant to conquest and/or forced assimilation). Given that miscegenation law was, for Pascoe, central to the making of race in the United States (and elsewhere), we see the peculiar role played by anti-black miscegenation law to that end, something that the subsequent patterns of interracial marriage and dating have borne out in the post-*Loving* moment.

I raise the above point about Pascoe’s text as one example of how studies of white supremacy, including those of the highest caliber, can and should be supplemented by an analysis of the dynamics of anti-blackness. This fundamental reframing of the study of race, philosophical and otherwise, is too often rejected by those who misconstrue the conceptual framework as a stricture on the topics and themes available for investigation. Can one examine the lived experience of multiracial Latino-Asian Americans in contemporary California or the nineteenth-century history of Anglo-Indians on the subcontinent through the lens of anti-blackness? Absolutely, as readily as one could explore the political mobilization of the Garifuna in Central America or the shifting significance of the social category “colored” in post-apartheid South Africa. If one is not only interested in yielding ethnographic data or phenomenological description—or, even in those cases, if one wants to generate better results—then one must attend to the broadest context of social relations available and, as indicated in the epigraph, allow the study to become a genuine “optic on power.” This is not only a plea for a more capacious relational research program, but also a rejoinder to the sort of parceling out of oppression that tends to inform approaches to comparative racialization, a problem traceable across a wide literature from Omi and Winant (2014) to Gines (2013). In this sort of approach, slavery is something experienced by a segment of the African Diaspora, settler colonialism and genocidal conquest by the indigenous peoples of the Americas, exclusionary immigration policy and imperial warfare by Asians, and so forth. A problem arises immediately for this typology when one considers that New World Africans have experienced *all* such forms of oppression: slavery, settler colonialism, genocidal conquest, exclusionary immigration policy, imperial warfare, and so on (Sexton 2015).

What the study of the African Diaspora and the unavoidably central place of racial slavery in its formation presents—theoretically and conceptually—is the demand to devise a framework for thinking about power in the most comprehensive manner, from the everyday to the extreme and, crucially, at the point where they fatally combine. Gordon (2000) suggested something along these lines when he remarked as follows:

I would say that the insight of some of the leaders in previous generations of mixed-race people [in and beyond the US context] is that they knew that no justice was to be attained in any contemporary society through the affirmation of a white [or lightened] identity. They knew they were mixed, but they also

knew that, when it comes to political action and the fight for social change, one has to work with those dimensions that will effect social change. (116)

The politically effective dimension: where DaCosta and Elam adumbrate a discourse of black identity “not at odds with being mixed-race,” a gesture that might read as indemnifying against allegations of essentialism or “monoracialism,” Sika Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) advances a formulation of mixed-race identity based in what she calls “black sentience” in response to the “brand new fetish” of multiracialism. For Dagbovie-Mullins:

Black sentience intimates a mixed-race subjectivity that includes a particular awareness of the world, a perception rooted in blackness. It suggests a connection to a black consciousness that does not overdetermine one’s racial identification but still plays a large role in it. The emergence of multiracial organizations that promote multiple-race classification options on census and other forms promotes and politicizes a multiracial identity that, I argue, tends to diminish blackness. Many black/white mixed-race people who reject multiracial classification advance a black subjectivity—a black-sentient consciousness, skeptical of what they see as elitism associated with projecting a biracial identity. A black-sentient mixed-race identity reconciles the widening separation between black/white mixed-race and blackness that has been encouraged by contemporary mixed-race politics and popular culture.

(Dagbovie-Mullins 2013: 2–3)

While Dagbovie-Mullins inadvertently reproduces an element of the negrophobia attendant to multiracialism when describing, elsewhere in her book, “black sentience” as enabling a form of identity that “resists racial scripts,” one in which “black consciousness does not completely dictate identification” (2013: 123); a crucial part of her formulation is that black sentience does not require a black identity, at least not in the common sense of the term. Rather, “a perception rooted in blackness” serves to ward against elitism and to actively resist the prevailing tendency “to diminish blackness.” Put somewhat differently, this is an ethical disposition that holds onto blackness and affirms it, not as a matter of cultural practice, but as a critical sensibility, an attachment to “a lived critique of the assumed equivalence of personhood and subjectivity” (Moten 2003: 242). Personhood, in the usual meaning of the term, indicates the achievement of or aspiration to some minimal distance toward black identity, as if that were some kind of achievement. This problematic definition of personhood would include as well those qualifications that serve or seek to mitigate “the dual significance of blackness as both sin and *suffering*” (Gordon 2000: 98). The ethical dimension of mixed-race, then, would condition any and all ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic claims and concerns as they are forged within the shadow of the overriding opposition to anti-blackness (and this is ipso facto an opposition to white supremacy in all of its forms and even opposition to hierarchy as such.)

The literature on multiracialism by and large acknowledges that anti-blackness is at least compatible with mixed-race claims and most allow that some do, in fact, articulate anti-black multiracial identities, but as a rule scholars and activists nonetheless maintain that anti-blackness is contingent to multiracialism and therefore consciously (easily?)

avoidable and, again, certainly not representative. Not only do such arguments overlook the way in which, as Minelle Mahtani recently noted at the abovementioned NYU symposium, the discourse of multiracialism is governed by “the grammar of good intentions” (Ryan 2003) and punctuated by symptomatic oaths of moral obligation; they also miss the crucial fact that *black* identities are compatible with anti-blackness as well and so share with mixed-race—and all other non-black identities—a common ethical challenge, if with radically divergent stakes. This intramural, even intrapsychic black struggle against anti-blackness—addressed by towering figures from Ida B. Wells and W.E.B. Du Bois to Malcolm X and Toni Cade Bambara—represents not only a searing critique and refusal of an anti-black world, but also an archive of examples of ways to affirm blackness, to love the *flesh* as it is embodied by those marked by racial blackness. Though it also functions as a form of defense and defiance, “black is beautiful” is in the first instance a solicitation to black folks to turn *toward* blackness as an ethical decision. But it is, at once and beyond that, a solicitation to the world. Black Power, the social movement that provides “American mixed-race” with its principal frame of reference and source of moral anxiety, re-politicized blackness and, at its best, re-energized it as a radical political identity. This identity was capacious enough to encompass differences among its constituency of gender and sexuality, color and complexion, class and nation, ethnicity and religion, education and language, age and ability, among others. All of these differences were sites of serious, sometimes lethal, conflict and many such differences—or rather an inability to engage them all as matters of *equality*—undermined the movement’s prospects and potential. But the history of black movements, as models of struggle not dependent upon interest-based coalition or strategic alliance as a means of negotiating difference, opens out into the political culture of radical politics in general. To state things more strongly, the history of black movements demonstrates not only the sustenance of radical tradition across several centuries, but also an incessant drive to radicalize its radicalism.

To be sure, black women, feminist-identified or not, and poor black women especially have been the leading social force of this movement within movements, but within the last two generations at least the gender conflict between black men and women and the class conflict between poor and working-class blacks and the black “*lumpenbourgeoisie*” (as E. Franklin Frazier would have it) has expanded, *pace* Hall, into a whole series of (long-standing but newly articulated) intersecting differences, most acutely regarding interrogations of black sexualities, genders, and abilities. The development of the concept of “misogynoir”—a portmanteau term naming the particular anti-black sexism targeting black women—by queer black feminist scholar Moya Bailey (2013) is a principle instance of this shift. In this light, we can see how forms of hetero-patriarchal blackness might also be considered anti-black because they claim forms of being black *plus* some normative striving: black but also man, but also heterosexual, black but . . . Not *just* black, but *also*. This sort of intersectional identification, when it is claimed in order to attenuate the social costs of anti-blackness, should not be confused with the critical practice of identifying intersectional identities that compound or condition such costs, that is, black and woman, disabled, queer. In point of fact, one could make the argument that, politically speaking, black women are blacker than black men, that black trans, queer, and genderqueer folks are blacker than presumptively heterosexual or cis-gendered blacks, and so on—even as we acknowledge that such ontic internal differentiation of the political ontology of racial blackness throws into permanent crisis the very terms of that gendered, sexual, classed differentiation (Warren 2013).

If we conceive of blackness in this way, as a “political blackness” (Guinier and Torres 2003), we might affirm and amplify not only the capaciousness (rather than the curtailment) of blackness in the historical movement of black people in the United States (including those of mixed heritage), but also affirm and amplify the capaciousness (rather than the curtailment) of blackness, for example, in the historical movement of Africans, West Indians, and Asians *as black people* in the UK of the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s (Sinvanandan 1990). This is not to romanticize the latter example, of course, given that its dissolution was linked to a submerged coalitional model of political struggle. What is of greatest interest is the fact that a multiracial demographic, as it were, could mobilize under the banner of blackness in order to *maximize* its radical political power. Gordon (2000) suggests as much, in a pointed response to the emerging multiracial movement of the 1990s:

Why not apply the one-drop rule with a vengeance by claiming any black ancestry? Why not simply “blacken” or “color” as much of the U.S. as possible? . . . Why darken the world? Because lightening our racist world will be perceived as a positive thing, which will increase the probability of differentiating the lighter from the light—in short, a new set of black folks. Whereas, to do the negative thing, to do more than darken it, to *blacken* it, will surely be perceived as an act calling for decisive action.

(116)

Blackening the world might *begin* by reframing the issues of greatest political concerns with respect to those most blackened by their effects. So when addressing the matter of mixed-race, we talk centrally about multiracial blacks, as it were. And from that vantage we are able to speak to and about a universe of overlapping struggles: black Asians (or “blasians”) and Afro-Latinos to illuminate the dynamics of “the racial middle” (O’Brien 2008), black Indians on indigenous struggles throughout the Americas, black immigrants with respect to nativism and xenophobia worldwide, black women pursuing the evolution of feminist theory and practice transnationally, black workers in international resistance to neoliberal capitalism, black students addressing the crisis of public education, and so forth. “Black X”: because to think the terms of political analysis and political mobilization through a black (or blackened) lens is to think from the point of constitutive exclusion from those very terms, which is to say freedom from those very terms insofar as that exclusion is affirmed. Not unlike the visual archive of the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, wherein we see a mounted placard bearing the affirmative defiant words:

ALL BLACK EVERYTHING.

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