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Black No More? The Recent Recognition of Mixed-Race Identity

For most of the history of the United States, the racial categorization of mixed black/white persons was illogical and often contradictory (Sollors, "Introduction" 6). Generally speaking, people with any percentage of black ancestry were most commonly classified simply as black (according to the "one-drop rule" imposed by whites), and, at times, recognized as a separate subgroup within this category. Interestingly, black and biracial people internalized the "one-drop" thinking, and by the 1920s people were unlikely to identify themselves as mulattoes (Pabst 199–200; Morton 116). This situation remained largely unchanged until the 1990s, which witnessed a noticeable shift towards acceptance and even celebration of mixedness (Hollinger 1370). This article aims to demonstrate how the new approaches to mixed race – postethnicity, hybridity and "mestizaje" – have complicated the traditional "either-or" racial division in the United States. It also argues that the long-established racial ideas – the "one drop" thinking and essentialism (albeit in a modified form) – are still strongly present in the American racial discourse. Comparing opposing stances on this matter, the article illustrates different possibilities of racial self-identification in the United States.

Since the 1990s, popular and academic interest in multiracialism has been growing (Elam xiii). For the first time since 1920, mixedness was also officially recognized by the state in the National Census 2000 (Zack 15). In the words of Patricia Morton, "American scholars are not only exploring the contemporary role of mulattoes, but also recognizing their historical existence and roots. [. . .] Americans of mixed black-white ancestry are no longer the most invisible 'invisible man' of American history" (122). Studies and anthologies on mixed race published in the last decade of the 20th century include such important works as: *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992) and *The Multiracial Experience* (1996) by Maria P. P. Root, *Race and Mixed Race* (1993) and *American Mixed Race* (1995) by Naomi Zack, as well as *Neither Black nor White yet Both* (1997) and *Interracialism* (2000) by Werner Sollors. The critical attention to the notion of mixed race continues unabated into the new millennium. Recent works include: *Mixing It Up* (2004) edited by SanSan Kwan and Kenneth Zack, *Complicating Constructions* (2007) edited by David Goldstein, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011) by Michele Elam and *Crossing B(l)ack* (2013) by Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins. Significantly, a growing body of such critical works is written by multiracial persons. Elam enumerates important moments of this new turn towards mixedness, which coincides with the development of post-race theories:

> In 1995, Maria P. P. Root hailed mixed race as the "new frontier"; the next year, Stanley Crouch proclaimed that "race is over." [. . .] Holland Cotter [wrote] in a 2001 [article] [. . .] that we are now witnessing the coming of "postblack or postethnic art." [. . .]

> Anthony Appiah advances a "new cosmopolitanism" that celebrates cultural contamination over [. . .] antiquated tribalism and identity politics. Ethnic hybridity [. . .] heralds a liberating 'racelessness' (Naomi Zack), a step "beyond race" (Ellis Cose), the "end of racism" (Dinesh D'Souza), a gesture "against race" (Paul Gilroy), a "new racial order" (G. Reginald Daniel) freed of a supposedly irresistible essentialism (Walter Benn Michaels). (xiv)

It is now a long established fact that race is a social construct and has little significance in terms of biology or genetics (Goldstein xv; Haney-Lopez 16). As early as in 1942 in his book, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, Ashley Montagu argued that the notion of race was based on wrong assumptions and poor science and served different economic, political and social purposes (Goldstein xv). In 1985, Kwame Anthony Appiah supported this claim in his essay, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race." Popularizing current scientific findings about race, Appiah concluded that "differences between peoples in language, moral affections, aesthetic attitudes, or political ideology are not [significantly] biologically determined" (22); biologically speaking, "the truth is that there are no races" (35). The question that comes to mind is this: if race does not exist, why do people recognize racial differences? The answer is given by Goldstein:

> Because most people [. . .] [in the USA] believe that race does mean something, they historically have behaved as if it does. The result, of course, is that the belief in racial categories has itself created, maintained, and perpetuated those categories. Race is a social construction; it means something only because we collectively believe, and behave as if it means something. (xvii)

The recognition of the constructedness of race enabled critics to create the theory of postethnicity, a state in which people's identity is no longer defined by ethnicity or race, which sees race as a constraint on identity and as a threat to freedom. In the words of David Hollinger:

> Postethnicity prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as a part of the normal life of a democratic society. (qtd. in Grassian 331)

This theory is potentially liberating for mixed-race persons. As racialized beings, they are often subjected to various (often contradictory) expectations, which come from all sides of their parental backgrounds. Different affiliations impose upon them different definitions of normative behavior. Post-ethnicity promises freedom from these restrictions. As race is considered insignificant and devoid of "essence," mixed-race people do not have to prove that they are "truly" black or white.

Another potentially liberating approach to race comes from societies which traditionally did not employ the "one-drop rule." Morton noted in 1985 that at the time "the new mulatto chic" was being promoted by immigrants from the West Indies, whose culture recognized mulattoes as an "intermediate and special group" (119). The contestation of the "one-drop" thinking came also from Mexico and Brazil. Sollors, writing in 1997, observed that "[t]he call for 'Mulatto Power' [. . .] may mark a turning point in the racial symbolism of the United States, which may be moving in the direction of the Latin American models at

this moment" (*Neither* 128–129). The basic difference between "one-drop" and "mestizaje," according to Morton, is that:

> In Latin American and West Indian societies, and in South Africa, mulattoes are classified and treated as a separate and intermediate category of persons, and may be described by an extensive array of terms corresponding to various fractions of racial mixture. Categorization is based primarily upon physical appearance as well as upon socioeconomic status. In North America, however, the two-tiered definition of race is based upon racial ancestry. (107)

Mexican mestizos (a term, which literally means "mixed") have Spanish, Indian, and Black African ethnocultural make-up. Their history goes back to the Spanish colonial period and intermarriages between Spanish soldiers and Indian women (which were common and prompted by a shortage of European spouses). The hybridity of mestizos was not considered a sign of inferiority and neither of their parental heritages was denied to them (DeSouza 186). Unsurprisingly, when Mexican immigrants encounter American reality of race relations, the two divergent visions of mixedness clash. As described by Carole DeSouza:

> Mexican nationals transport their mestizo/a sensibility [. . .] to the United States, only to encounter American discomfort with both multiracial and Native American existence. The North American "one-drop rule" runs counter to a mestizo consciousness, especially since mestizo identity is already established as historically multicultural before it is monoracially socialized in the United States. And though Black Americans are read visually along a rainbow of possible racial traits while still included and identified as "Black," Latin Americans are resistant to such "racial amnesia" and cognizant of their individual mixture of parental races. (186)

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "new mestiza consciousness" expresses precisely such a non-binary approach to race. First voiced in her seminal article: "La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness" (1987), the term refers to Anzaldúa's Chicana experience. Replacing "the figure of the tragic mestizo, nostalgically looking back to a lost homeland" with that of a "new mestiza," Anzaldúa turns to a celebration of mixedness (Kaup 195). The "new mestiza" is a "mixture of races," a "hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool;" she has "an 'alien' consciousness" that results from a "racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination" (Anzaldua 77). Choosing to see mixedness as an asset rather than a burden, Anzaldua stresses the adaptive skills of the "new mestiza":

> The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. [. . .] She learns to juggle cultures. She [. . .] operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. (79)

Homi Bhabha's term "hybridity," popularized in the 1990s, corresponds well with Anzaldúa's approach. Frequently used in the discourse of postcolonial and mixed race studies, the notion of hybridity challenges the concept of pure identity, race, and culture (Zackodnik 177). This negation of purity is aptly explained by Samira Kawash:

> In the place of the essentialized identities [. . .] (based on national, ethnic, or racial borders that were presumed to separate pure cultures or groups) critics now look at the ways in which

> the pure is always already contaminated. [. . .] [Hybrid identities] designate such historical conditions as interaction, interdependency, cultural transformation, and movement. [. . .] [E]very appeal to some originary, authentic, pure identity [. . .] can only be an appeal to a mythical purity. [. . .] [F]ixity, autonomy, stability, and separation of the racial categories of black and white are undermined, subverted, and destabilized. (2)

In the context of the American racial binary of black and white, hybridity corresponds to "identity that seemingly only has the capacity to occupy two forms" but actually "encompass[es] another [one]" (Iyall 6). In other words, biracial people have a sense of "twoness," which is a separate identity in itself and is "distinct from either single [one] contributing to the duality" (6). Moreover, the hybrid identity is not stable but "pluralistic" and "relational"; it changes according to situation, involves an expert application of adaptive skills and enables a person to perform different roles (Iyall 5; Young 24). As explained by Monika Kaup, who draws on the ideas of Edouard Glissant, "relation-identity [is] [. . .] unfinished, open-ended, fluid"; it is "a dynamic process of crossing and continuous formation." Hybridity rejects "boundaries, single origins, and static definitions" and "stands in direct contrast to nation-identity, conventionally associated with permanence, roots, linearity, and territorial boundaries." While "nation-identity [. . .] looks back to the past," "relation-identity anticipates the future" (186). A similar point is made by Fu-Jen Chen, who observes that "hybridized" people "experience identity as a matter of choice and an act of performance, [floating] [. . .] from one to another identification and temporary embodiment" (381). In light of this theory, mixedness, as a manifestation of hybridity, becomes an advantage. According to Keri Iyall, in the context of globalization, "[t]he ability to negotiate across barriers – language, cultural, spiritual, racial, and physical – is an asset [. . .] [for] [t]hose who can easily cross barriers in a world of amorphous borders" (4).

Surprisingly, the notions of postethnicity and hybridity, which offer mixed-race people freedom from racial constraints and the possibility of choosing an identity that is outside of the black/white racial binary, are sometimes criticized by members of this very category. As Samira Kawash observes, generally speaking, theories that deny the importance of race are often treated with suspicion among people of color (4). In the words of Ian Haney-Lopez:

> More likely than not those whose identity is [. . .] most deeply conceived of in biologically racial terms – Black more than Latinos and Asians, and these more than Whites – will most strenuously object to the arguments that races exist only as a social, not a biological, reality. [. . .] African Americans constitute the group most rigorously defined along putatively biological lines, both externally through the powerful racial ideologies [. . .], and internally via the advancement of a positive self-image tied to physical difference and ancestry. (9)

The most obvious criticism of post-race theories is that they are utopian and do not correspond in any way to the everyday experience of racial minorities in the United States (Kaup 186). It is, perhaps, a truism to say that race feels real in everyday life; still, Haney-Lopez helps grasp the extent to which it is so in the United States:

> Race dominates our personal lives. It manifests itself in our speech, dance, neighbors, and friends – "our very ways of talking, walking, eating and dreaming are ineluctably shaped by notions of race." Race determines our economic prospects. The race-conscious market screens

> and selects us for manual jobs and professional careers [. . .]. Race permeates our politics. It alters electoral boundaries, shapes the disbursement of local, state, and federal funds, fuels the creation and collapse of political alliances, and twists the conduct of law enforcement. In short, race mediates every aspect of our lives. (3)

Kawash makes a similar point, criticizing the utopianism of the new approaches: "[T]he color line signals [. . .] the conceptual, political, and geographical boundary beyond which lies the utopian promise of a community of hybridity. [. . .] But utopia is not a place that you can go; we are always only in the here and now" (6). Tavia Nyong'o remarks, somewhat sarcastically, that "[r]acism is the writing on the wall [. . .], but colorblind America is also illiterate" (6). Sollors ponders, perhaps unduly, whether "the deliberate nonrecognition of race" does not have "even more sinister consequences" than the institutional racism of the past (Introduction 4).

Another criticism, connected with the one discussed above, is that post-race theories disregard the historical memory of racism and help weaken the position of racial minorities (Nyong'o 16). According to Elam, it is not a coincidence that "the ascension of mixed race popularity has been enabled in the post-race [. . .] era, and in concert with the quiet dismantling of affirmative action and the weakening of traditional civil rights lobbies" (xiv). Critics and writers who share these views agree that mixed black/white people should ally themselves with African Americans in an act of solidarity with the historically oppressed (Dagbovie 108). It is argued that insisting on biracialism means turning away from the stigma of blackness (107–108). Lisa Jones, who opposes biraciality as a separate racial category, rhetorically asks: "When we distance ourselves from the African-American freedom struggle, from [. . .] ideas like 'black power' and 'black community,' do we fail to honor a history that brought us to where we are today? Is biraciality political sedition?" (59). This view, although worded less radically, is shared by Katya Gibel Azoulay, who advocates the adoption of "strategic essentialism," even if it is a "poor philosophy," because biraciality means assimilation (135–137). Coined by Gayatri Spivak, the term "strategic essentialism" means temporarily assuming one shared (in this case, racial) identity to achieve certain goals. Azoulay supports her views by quoting Stuart Hall:

> Political identity often requires the need to make conscious commitments. Thus it may be necessary to momentarily abandon the multiplicity of cultural identities for more simple ones around which political lines have been drawn. You need all the folks together, under one hat, carrying one banner, saying [that] [. . .] for the purpose of this fight, we are all the same, just black and just here. (qtd. in Azoulay 137)

There are other arguments in favor of retaining the "one-drop" racial categorization. Morton claims that the celebration of mixedness can actually worsen race relations and the situation of multiracial people:

> New People "fever" is exacerbating the residual color divisions left over from a history of white preferential treatment of mulattoes in America, and is contributing to the waning of Afro-American power, with the dormancy of the Civil Rights Movement, and with growing class divisions reinforced now by ethno-cultural divisions. (119)

Another argument in favor of the "one-drop" is that "strategic essentialism does not negate the plurality of identities and their mutability" (Azoulay 137). Similarly, Naomi Pabst, while fiercely opposed to all essentialisms, maintains that mixedness is, and has always been, a subcategory of blackness:

> When there is black/white mixing involved, the dominant classificatory arguments posit that interracial subjects are essentially black; essentially mixed; essentially code-switchers, chameleons [. . .]. Sidestepping this ever unresolvable [. . .] battle of essentialisms, a more productive negotiation of mixed race would ground and normalize hybridity as integral to race and culture while also highlighting the issues of difference and belonging mixed-race subjectivity raises. Accordingly, black/white interraciality [. . .] could be fruitfully situated within a framework of black difference. (179–180)

As evidenced by these various criticisms, the position of mixedness *vis-à-vis* blackness cannot be easily determined. The break with the traditional "one-drop" thinking is by no means complete, even though a few alternative approaches to race and mixed-race have surfaced in the last twenty-odd years. Contradictory stances coexist; post-racial thinking is not predominant and racial essentialism, even though stigmatized by the academia, is far from being extinct (Kawash 4). Mixed-race people are still to a large extent expected to self-identify not according to their own will, but in compliance with certain racialized political agenda.

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Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia relatywnie niedawną zmianę, jaka zaszła w kategoryzacji tożsamości rasowej w USA. Tradycyjnie postrzegani i identyfikujący się jako podgrupa Afroamerykanów zgodnie z zasadą „jednej kropli krwi", dawni „Mulaci" zyskali w ciągu ostatnich dziesięcioleci nowe możliwości definiowania swej tożsamości rasowej dzięki teoriom postetniczności i hybrydowości, tożsamości „new mestiza" i wpływom świata latynoskiego. Jednocześnie ujawniły się głosy krytyki wobec porzucenia esencjalistycznego postrzegania rasowości. Porównując przeciwstawne stanowiska w tej sprawie, artykuł przedstawia różne możliwości (auto)identyfikacji rasowej w USA.