Assessing Multiracial Identity Theory and Politics: The Challenge of Hypodescent
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Assessing multiracial identity theory and politics

The challenge of hypodescent

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ABSTRACT  It is increasingly possible to detect a split in regard to current analyses of multiracial identity in the United States. On the one hand there remains a relatively naïve brand of multiracial activism and identity politics that has deep roots in the recent movement to institute a US federal multiracial category; while on the other hand we find a steadily maturing body of scholarship on mixed-race identity that is several levels removed in terms of intellectual rigor and objectivity. As this latter movement continues to mature, it increasingly forces the former to acknowledge and to confront important issues of logical consistency in the multiracial identity debate. This article represents an effort to guide and shape that discussion in assessing the ideological foundation of multiracial identity politics in the United States.

KEYWORDS  biracial ● mixed race ● mixed-race identity ● monoracial ● one-drop rule ● hypodescent

Tomorrow’s multiracial people could just as easily become the next decade’s something else. A name, in the end, is just a name. The problem is that we want those names to mean so much – even if the only result is a perpetuation of an ever-more-refined kind of racial madness. (Ellis Cose, Color Blind, 1997)

INTRODUCTION

For the last 12–15 years, the United States has been grappling in very public and very political ways with the question of mixed-race identity. 1 It is a
question that has been debated over these years in a variety of formats: in scholarly books and journal articles, between the pages of news magazines, in the halls of Congress, and finally, on that lowest of common denominators – the daytime television talk show. Mixed-race identity has, of course, been an issue in British North America and later in the United States for hundreds of years as mulattoes, octoroons, and quadroons have long been fixtures on the American scene. Recent times, however, have seen the mixed-race idea and the question of a US federal multiracial category occasionally occupy the forefront of national debate in ways it never had previously.

Given these competing and often conflicting platforms, there is a need for measured and reflective intellectual discussion; and I dare say, a compelling necessity for persons other than today’s most popular talk-show hosts to direct this important debate. Focusing on the Afro-American case as a primary example/counter-example, this article represents an attempt to relocate consideration of mixed-race identity from the emotion-charged and theory-challenged ground of popular media coverage to a more fertile field of scholarly deliberation.

In so doing I want to suggest two interrelated propositions:

1. that there is great potential for theorizing about mixed-race issues in academically valid ways that must be separated from a more naïve brand of multiracial identity advocacy; and
2. that in order to proceed down that more intellectually challenging path it will be necessary to ask and answer some hard questions that are usually avoided by the activists who raise the multiracial banner, as well as by the scholars who sympathize with and support them.

In regard to the first proposition, we are currently witnessing the beginning stages of such a phenomenon – what Lisa Tessman refers to as ‘mixed-race racial theory’ (1999: 276). Unfortunately, much of the good work being done now is not widely known, with a major portion of the problem being the continued dominance of uncritical popular media coverage. This phenomenon, consisting essentially of superficial appeals to sentimentality, was most evident when professional golfer Tiger Woods came to national prominence in 1997. The attitude lingers today in the work of writers who argue that the appropriateness of US federal policy regarding racial classification should hinge on its being able to ‘foster positive self-identity in multiracial individuals,’ causing one theorist sympathetic to the multiracial movement to characterize it as employing ‘a rhetoric that speaks in only general and vague terms of identity problems, without providing any social science evidence demonstrating why a new racial category is necessary to the welfare of America’s multiracial population’ (Linehan, 2000: 45).
This emphasis comes at a cost, as Stephen Small describes: ‘But the movement has its problems . . . Much of the focus of the movement is on the psychological issues involved in identity formation, and is frequently indifferent to the social consequences of the demands’ (2001: 126). One example of those social consequences is the threat to the existing civil rights compliance monitoring structure, as Lisa Pomeroy explains:

The value of census data in the battle against race discrimination is beyond measure . . . The success of efforts to combat racist practices requires careful monitoring, monitoring often accomplished by census data. Therefore, advocates of the revisions to [US federal racial categorization] must reconsider viewing those revisions as a victory, and instead consider the negative impact these revisions could have on the ultimate goal of eliminating race discrimination. (2000: 87)

Thanks in part to the notoriety of Woods and the bathos it inspired and continues to inspire, the multiracial identity debate received steady, if modest, popular attention throughout the decade of the 1990s in the United States. Less attention came from academic sources, as only a few scholarly volumes of a substantial nature focusing specifically on multiracial identity were published between 1990 and 1999. However, if we examine the latter end of this period and beyond we begin to witness a significantly increased productivity. During the final third of the decade and following, single-authored volumes began to multiply and to overtake the anthology as the primary means of publishing multiracial research. Scholarly journal articles are becoming available from fields as diverse as law, philosophy, and sociology, although those same disciplinary boundaries serve to limit dissemination to potentially broader readerships.

As an example of the kind of scholarship to which I am referring, Lisa Tessman’s application of Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s theory of racial formation (1994) to the actual operation of the multiracial movement in the United States is groundbreaking work. Focusing on issues of social justice, Tessman questions whether the multiracial movement is in fact a force likely to affect the trajectory of the racial state – whether it is really capable of bringing about a ‘disequilibrated’ state or merely represents a pathway toward uncollectivized and unpoliticized assimilation (1999: 286).

Debbie Storrs writes about whiteness being such a stigma that certain mixed-race women consciously reject it, going so far as refusing to include it in their self-conceptions (1999). Like Tessman, Storrs also invokes Omi and Winant’s racial formation theory through her finding that the mixed-race women in her study demonstrate an ‘ability to rearticulate the meaning of stigma’ (1999: 188). Storrs’ work is particularly important in that it opens the door to more expansive and more sophisticated explorations of the ways that people understand their racial identities, thereby eclipsing much traditional work on mixed-race identity.
Finally, moving beyond the usual dichotomy of accepting either a black or a biracial identity, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma expand the possibilities of racial identity by suggesting that black/white multiracial individuals may in fact be opting from among four different identity choices that they label border, protean, transcendent, and traditional (2002). Rockquemore and Brunsma’s hypothesis calls into question the simplistic formulations of multiracial identity so often championed by multiracial advocates, and so readily accepted by the popular media.

The foregoing represent merely a sampling of contemporary, critical, cutting-edge scholarship that nonetheless struggles to be heard over the superficial kind of multiracial identity coverage typically found in weekly news magazines. Additional works that engage this higher-level (Christian, 2000; Dalmage, 2000; King, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Spencer, 2000; Winters and DeBose, 2003) seem likely to proliferate as well.

This recent scholarship also marks a significant disciplinary branching in terms of writings on the subject of multiracial identity. Whereas the field of multiracial theorizing has previously been dominated by writers actively lobbying for federal recognition of multiracial identity, much of the newer literature represents more of a meta-theoretical approach. In other words, while a portion of the field still concentrates on arguing that race is real and that multiracial identity is a biological reality, many of the newer theorists are concerned with analyzing and problematizing those kinds of assertions and the assumptions upon which they are based.²

Although it might prove a somewhat cumbersome term to deploy, what I would call meta-multiracial theory is the emergent scholarly phenomenon I am here describing. If multiracial ideology is a philosophical and political position that advocates such public policy initiatives as explicit multiracial curricula in US public schools (Chiong, 1998: 83–91; Wardle, 1999–2000), and a federal multiracial category, then meta-multiracial theory is a higher-level analysis concerned with the methods, logic, and consequences of that ideology. The remainder of this article may be read as a modest offering of meta-multiracial theorizing.

As the field of multiracial identity studies matures, it is natural that there should develop opposing theoretical blocks within the literature. The works I have highlighted above provide significant critiques of the current multiracial identity movement in the United States. One of the questions I am interested in is whether it is possible for scholarly works that are supportive of multiracial ideology to rise to the level of ontological meta-inquiry, or whether they are – because of the specifics of that very ideology – relegated to remaining an element of the object studied as opposed to taking part in the more transcendent debate.

In general, scholarly works of multiracial advocacy are of varying types, and take varying approaches, even while often reaching the same ultimate conclusions. As in any field of study, some additions to the literature are
more formidable than others. At one end of the scale are works that simply do not rise to the level of rigorous, academically sound scholarship (Korgen, 1998; Wardle, 1999). These texts are presented in a scholarly format, but either have serious logical defects or rely in a profoundly overt way on the notion of biological race in order to advance their arguments.

Another level on this side of the literature is more academically rigorous, and makes important contributions to the debate, yet contains the decisive flaw of reifying biological race by asserting that a modern-day ‘biracial baby boom’ has been the result of increasing marriages between biologically distinct monoracial groups (Brown, 2001; Daniel, 2002; Kilson, 2001; Linehan, 2000; Root, 2001; Wallace, 2001). As I explain in a later section, assertions that interracial marriages and resultant childbirths have increased by such-and-such a percentage are every bit as problematic as they are unquestioned.

It may be that future works on the advocacy side will come yet closer to meta-theorizing, and that, ultimately, is part of the discussion I want to stimulate via this article. The sections of the article that follow are concerned with formulating and presenting a dialectical challenge to theorists who advocate multiracial identity, in hopes that future responses and the resulting conversation will allow us to gain a clearer picture of the evolving terrain of multiracial identity politics, and of the opposing paradigms that are beginning to define the field.

**CONFRONTING HYPODESCENT**

One drop of Negro blood makes a Negro. It kinks the hair, flattens the nose, thickens the lip, puts out the light of intellect, and lights the fires of brutal passions.

The rule that had no exception was that one drop of Negro blood makes a Negro. (Thomas Dixon, The Leopard’s Spots, 1994[1902])

The second proposition I suggested in the introductory section of this article is that hard questions need asking and answering if multiracial identity politics and ideology are to make the transition from what Danzy Senna refers to as a simplistic kind of mixed-race ‘chemistry’ to becoming a viable contribution to a serious and coherent field of study (1998: 78). As an example of the kind of question I have in mind, we may turn our attention to an area of multiracial ideology that would seem in need of revision or rearticulation.

I am referring to America’s long-standing application of the *one-drop rule*, or hypodescent – the social mechanism that works to place the offspring of two different racial groups into the lower-status category. Coming into play in the United States primarily in cases of black/white
mixture, hypodescent implies that whiteness is a pure essence whose purity cannot withstand mixture with blackness, while blackness is an antipodal and impure essence.

As an example of hypodescent in the context of the American racial paradigm, the child of a white parent and a black parent is categorized as black, but not white. Even if an acknowledgment of partial white ancestry is made, it nonetheless does not confer whiteness on the individual. In fact, the primary function of hypodescent is to ensure that any sub-Saharan African ancestry (no matter how remote) disqualifies the person (no matter her phenotype) from being able to successfully stake a claim to a white identity. The only way to possess sub-Saharan African ancestry and be accepted as white is to hide that ancestry by engaging in racial passing. Therefore, whether consciously or not, advocates of hypodescent support the twin notions of biological white purity and biological black impurity since one can only be white if one has no sub-Saharan African ancestry, while one can be part-anything else and still be black. In this article I want to examine the explicit objection to the application of hypodescent in the case of so-called black/white multiracials.

Hypodescent, which originally provided economic and social utility to supporters of American slavery and white supremacy by ensuring that mixed children would be considered black and therefore ineligible for participation in the benefits of whiteness is now accepted and even embraced by most Afro-Americans. In an ironic twist, they have appropriated hypodescent and the enlargement of their population that derives from it, welcoming the idea of ‘one-drop of African blood’ as a unifying theme around which to rally. For Americans of African descent who have adopted a multiracial identity, however, the concept would appear to hold considerably less appeal.

Arguing for official recognition of multiracial identity in the public policy sphere, Naomi Zack writes that ‘many individuals of mixed black and white race, especially of first generation “mixture,” experience the one-drop rule not only as racist in itself, against them, but as fundamentally supportive of the false categories of race’ (1995a: 125). Zack’s thoughts are echoed by G. Reginald Daniel, who finds that ‘the one-drop rule is racist’ (Wright, 1994: 48); and by Teresa Williams, who offers that the ‘multiplicity of black-white multiracials was suppressed through the social, legal implementation of “one-drop” hypodescent policies’ (1996: 197). These writers, also contributors to the new wave of multiracial scholarship that has flourished especially since the mid-1990s, would appear to stand rigidly opposed to the concept of hypodescent.

The repudiation of hypodescent by those in favor of a US federal multiracial category extends beyond the scholarly ranks as well. According to Carlos Fernández, current legal counsel and former president of the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), the foremost multiracial
advocacy organization in the United States: ‘AMEA’s argument is that . . . 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 US Constitution’ (1996: 29).

It is imperative that critical thought and scholarly rigor begin to take center stage on this issue, freeing it from the excessive emphasis on sentimentality and pathology that so pervades popular media coverage. In support of that end I want to modestly explore two specific but related maxims of multiracial ideology, both of which are impacted by hypodescent:

1. that so-called multiracial people today represent a new and rising population; and
2. that multiracial identity is subversive of the American racial paradigm.

In terms of the first point, I shall raise the question of whether the idea of a multiracial or biracial population is indeed new. Additionally, it will be necessary to ascertain whether claims asserting that there are a particular number of multiracial children in the United States today (and that their number has suddenly begun to rise) can be made without a reliance on hypodescent, whether conscious or unconscious.

This latter question is a critical one, since on the basis of their own statements leaders and theorists of the multiracial movement would appear to deploy a selective hypodescent that is not consistent with their stated aversion to the concept. Upon close analysis, as we shall see, multiracial supporters have been as yet unable to avoid being complicit with the very paradigm they decry so stridently. Whether this represents a fatal flaw of multiracial ideology or whether there exist corrective revisions that might neutralize the inconsistency remains to be seen. These two issues, one a question of history and the other a question of theory, shall guide the progress of this article.

RACE, MIXED-RACE, AND FORGOTTEN HISTORY

Are multiracial people a new phenomenon? Have they suddenly exploded onto the American scene as a distinct and growing population? Even a passing familiarity with American history would indicate that such cannot be the case; yet if one trusted the information found in popular publications such as *Time* or *Newsweek*, the answers to the above questions would both be ‘yes.’ The unfortunate fact that more Americans have educated themselves about the multiracial identity debate through popular journalism than through close readings of scholarly texts or journal articles makes it
imperative that the information reported by the popular press be accurate. Sadly, this has been far from the case, although not all the blame rests with the media.

A good portion of it does, though, as staff writers seem unfailingly to gravitate toward maudlin sentimentality and overly affected attempts at hipness in their articles. The usual result is a particularly patronizing type of critically vacuous journalism characterized by subtitles such as: ‘The Promise and Perils of Life in the New Multiracial Mainstream’ (Clemetson, 2000: 70); ‘Tiger Woods is the Exception that Rules. For his Multiracial Generation, Hip isn’t just Black and White’ (Leland and Beals, 1997: 58); and ‘A Mother’s Cry: “My Son is Three Races”’ (White, 1997: 36). Even when the popular media actually does incorporate US federal data, it tends to do so in an uncritical and racially reifying way. For instance, both Time and Newsweek cite the US Bureau of the Census as supporting the idea of multiracial persons as a new population. Specifically, a 1997 US Bureau of the Census report asserted that ‘the number of children in interracial families increased from less than 500,000 in 1970 to about two million in 1990’ (1997: 1–3).

Scientifically speaking, however, these figures are meaningless biologically, and demonstrate only the general pervasiveness of hypodescent in American society. The Bureau of the Census’s willingness to deploy hypodescent in the case of any Afro-American parents in these families illustrates how very easily monoracial blackness is reproduced without eliciting any challenge or critical commentary. It is important to see that numbers such as those offered by the Bureau of the Census are based on eliding the extensive population mixture with Europeans and Native Americans that Afro-Americans possess so that the latter may be recoded as a monoracial black population. Nothing could be farther from the truth, though, as Afro-Americans are likely the most genetically diverse population in the United States, owing to both recent and more remote population mixture as well as internal miscegenation that has been ongoing for centuries.7

One might object that my critique of the US Bureau of the Census here is unduly harsh since the bureau is merely utilizing standardized federal conceptions of race whose genesis can be traced to other government agencies. Indeed, more than 30 years ago, Exhibit K of Bureau of the Budget Circular A-46 stated that race as used in federal statistics was ‘not a clear-cut biological definition’ (1969); and more than 20 years ago, the revised Exhibit F of the same document (by then a US Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Circular) declared that ‘these classifications should not be interpreted as being scientific or anthropological in nature’ (1977: 1). Additionally, the bureau’s figures are based on the self-reporting of respondents. Merely stating that the information is not biological, however, does not diminish the important ways that race is reified through
so powerful an entity as the US federal government. Moreover, the clarifying caveats noted above are found only in the promulgating documents, and not on the response forms themselves.

All of this serves to highlight how deeply embedded in US society the racial paradigm and hypodescent are. In utilizing hypodescent-driven figures to arrive at some discrete and limited number of multiracial children, the US Bureau of the Census reifies the idea of biological race and the corresponding fiction of white racial purity. After all, the white partners in these marriages are white presumably because they are not mixed with anything else (especially not with any sub-Saharan African ancestry), while the black partners remain black despite extensive population mixture in their family histories. It is this foundation of hypodescent that serves as the springboard for an assertion that is becoming increasingly popular.

Kathleen Korgen writes of a ‘biracial baby boom’ commencing shortly after the *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia Supreme Court* decision of 1967, and resulting in the births of as many as 50,000 black/white children in 1990 alone (1998: 20). Ursula Brown also cites the Loving case, arguing that it was the causal agent of an ‘interracial baby boom’ (2001: 19). However, Korgen and Brown engage in ahistoricism, as Rockquemore points out:

> Despite advocates’ claims, biracial-ness is not a newly emergent social phenomenon. The Census is merely the latest manifestation of the ongoing socio-historical problematic of classifying mixed-race people in the United States . . . The Census issue provides a contemporary variation on the classification dilemma. (1998: 197–198)

Korgen’s difficulties in reconciling historical reality with multiracial ideology are apparent when, presenting her opinion of the hardships faced by black/white multiracials, she describes them as being ‘viewed and treated, by both black and white persons, as African Americans’ (1998: 62). Yet they are surely every bit as much Americans of African descent as they are Americans of European descent. However, Korgen manufactures a false distinction between black/white multiracials and Afro-Americans that effectively diminishes the African ancestry of the former while reifying the monoracial blackness of the latter. That she does this is all the more surprising since Korgen devotes the first chapter of her book, *From Black to Biracial*, to a brief history of African and European population mixture in North America (1998).

The question I am pursuing here is not whether persons who have considered themselves to be black and white respectively have intermarried in greater numbers since the Loving decision. Rather, the question is whether the children resulting from these unions are distinct biologically from Afro-American children in general. It is a question that multiracial advocates have as yet been unable to substantiate an affirmative answer to. Heather Dalmage pinpoints this dilemma as a major problem facing
multiracial identity activists and the theorists who support them: ‘Trying to move one step forward, Korgen tripped and fell two steps backward by assuming that people who claim a multiracial identity are biologically different from those who claim a single-race black identity or single-race white identity’ (2000: 148).

One of the more extreme examples of this sort of confusion comes by way of Francis Wardle, executive director of an entity called the Center for the Study of Biracial Children. Wardle variously compares biracial children to dogs, cats, cattle, and horses in attempting to invoke the argument for hybrid vigor in the case of human beings. Claiming that ‘from a purely biological point of view, hybrids (genetic combinations of two or more distinct genetic pools of animals, birds, plants, people) are stronger than single species or single race plants or animals,’ Wardle asserts that ‘biracial children exhibit maximum genetic variability’ since ‘they combine genes from two fairly isolated gene pools’ (1999: 92–93).

One is hard-pressed to imagine which two groups Wardle has in mind here as persons of African and European descent have been intermixing in North America for hundreds of years, resulting – through both direct and internal miscegenation – in today’s Afro-American population. F. James Davis reports:

at least three-fourths of all people defined as American blacks have some white ancestry, and some estimates run well above 90 percent . . . In terms of gene frequencies, apparently somewhere between one-fifth and one-fourth of the genes of the American black population are from white ancestors. (1991: 21)

What is clear is that arguments based on an assumed distinction between black/white multiracials and the general Afro-American population are impossible to defend when challenged.

Hoping to evade this criticism by introducing an element of stratification into the concept of multiracial identity, some advocates have posited a sub-distinction between those children who are ‘immediately mixed’ and those whose mixture is more temporally remote, but this argument also fails to address the critical point that the black parent of a so-called first generation multiracial child is herself or himself the product of population mixture (Daniel, 2002; Wallace, 2001). Daniel provides an opportunity to examine this particular model:

- ‘This first-generation identity is derived from having one parent who is socially designated, and self-identified, as black, and one who is socially designated, and self-identified, as white, regardless of the multiple racial and cultural backgrounds in their parents’ genealogy’ (2002: 102).
- ‘“Multigenerational” individuals have parents, or even generations of ancestors, who have been viewed as black by society although
their backgrounds include African American, European American, and other ancestries (particularly Native American); these individuals, and/or their parents and ancestors, have resisted identifying solely with the African American community’ (2002: 6).

- ‘African Americans . . . for the most part have multiple racial/cultural backgrounds but a single-racial/cultural identity as black’ (2002: 106).

Daniel’s first-generation/multigenerational/Afro-American distinction hinges upon shifting the racial criterion from biology to social designation. It is a maneuver that proves to be inherently contradictory, failing the most fundamental test of logical consistency since if we base the racial identities of the parents on social designation we should base the racial identities of the children on the same criterion. Yet, in Daniel’s formulation, the parents are monoracial purely because of social designation, while the so-called ‘first-generation’ child is multiracial precisely and only because she or he is the biological child of those socially designated black and white parents.

We should take note as well of a telling irony that is a necessary corollary of Daniel’s model. Since the first-generation multiracial individual is defined explicitly by having monoracial parents of different races, whereas the multigenerational individual is defined by having ancestors whose supposed initial mixture lies farther back in time, the inevitable conclusion as to what distinguishes the two is that the former are, in a sense, more racially pure! One expects this sort of tangled, logically invalid proposition from lay movement advocates whose emotions tend often to overwhelm all other considerations. That it comes instead from one of the leading theorists of multiracial identity brings into sharper focus the question of whether multiracial ideology actually musters much at all in the way of real intellectual content once one delves beneath the surface.⁹

There is in fact no distinction to be made amongst the three groups in Daniel’s model as all are the result of the past and ongoing population mixture that has literally defined what it means to be Afro-American. The critical issue for meta-theorists remains the reality of Afro-American heterogeneity and the continuous erasure of that heterogeneity through hypodescent, as Ishmael Reed illustrates when describing the mixing of Europeans and African slaves even prior to their arrival in the Americas:

So to describe the population of mixed-race people as a ‘growing part’ of the population is to deny that millions of white and black Americans are already mixed. The phenomenon of mixed Americans is nothing new, though it may be getting more attention these days. (1998: 74)

As Joel Williamson has shown, the true biracial baby boom occurred some 300 years ago, principally in the colony of Virginia, as European indentured servants and Africans (indentured servant, slave, and free) procreated together and established what might be termed the original
mulatto stock of British North America (1980: ch. 1). This initial mixing was then followed by later surges in the American mulatto population, finally achieving a ‘critical mass’ and resulting in what Williamson calls ‘a wellspring of mulattoes, a “mulatto pool”’ (1980: 56–7). Yet, if one put stock in the assertions of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the US Bureau of the Census, the most vocal multiracial activists, and the least rigorous pro-movement scholars, one would be led to believe that all these mulattoes – and their descendants – practically disappeared from the continent since there supposedly were only a mere 500,000 American multiracial children in 1970.

One might object that the Bureau of the Census does not state quite this, but rather asserts that there were 500,000 children in interracial families. But such an objection merely makes the point I have thus far been advancing. If one argues that there were a good deal many more than 500,000 multiracial children in the United States in 1970, that in fact the vast majority of Afro-Americans have racially mixed ancestries, one then has to answer the question of why they should in the first place be considered the monoracially black partners in interracial marriages. The answer, of course, is a selective application of hypodescent; the result of which is a continual erasure of the historical population mixture that defines America, and especially Afro-Americans.

The roots of this historical amnesia lie perhaps in the fact that what might be termed the contemporary cachet of a racially mixed heritage fades somewhat quickly if it is admitted that in the past there have been millions of biracial and multiracial Americans who have produced millions upon millions of descendants. In terms of multiracial ideology, the truth about the extensive population mixture in American history is something that should be addressed, but generally is not. It is a modern and quite self-imposed blindness, as any honest assessment of the past will show.

It should provoke no controversy, then, to point out that the widely accepted claim of a population of multiracial children in the United States that grew from only 500,000 in 1970 to two million in 1990 is based on the explicit excision of European ancestry from any Afro-American parents of those children in question. Indeed, it is only possible to posit a mere two million multiracial children in the United States (as opposed to the millions and millions of Afro-American children of mixed heritage) by selectively deploying hypodescent in order to simultaneously reproduce the twin myths of monoracially black people and white racial purity. As an example of this tendency, Linehan, who is supportive of multiracial identity, asserts that ‘currently, there are approximately 5,000,000 multiracial children in the United States’ (2000: 48). Daniel also offers a population figure: ‘Despite statistical limitations, the total population of black-white parentage, ranging in age from infants to young adults, is believed to number from 600,000 to several million’ (2002: 101).

Far from a mere two, five, or several million, if one were to objectively
posit the existence of multiracial children, they would number at least as many as there are Afro-American children in the United States. Advocates and theorists of multiracial identity politics, however, have generally failed to seize the opportunity – indeed, the necessity – to reconcile their ideology with this compelling conclusion. By failing to address this inconsistency – a failure shared by both lay and scholarly advocates of multiracial ideology – the well-documented admixture of European and Native American genetic material to the Afro-American population over the centuries through both direct mixing and subsequent internal miscegenation is denied continually, with the result that Afro-Americans are posited as monoracially black people who are capable of producing multiracial children only when they procreate with whites or others. The inescapable fact is that such children are no more racially mixed than the Afro-American halves of their respective parent sets. To assert that the child of a white person and an Afro-American is multiracial, but that the Afro-American parent is not, is to selectively apply hypodescent to the parent but not to the child. This, again, is the difficulty posed by the apparent silence of multiracial identity theorists on the question of past and internal miscegenation.

INTERSECTION AND INCONSISTENCY: HYPODESCENT AND MULTIRACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS

The kinds of questions I am raising are sure to become more common as the multiracial discourse continues to mature, and it therefore becomes increasingly incumbent on adherents of multiracial ideology to address these questions head-on, and sooner rather than later. This is particularly the case for those who would argue that pro-advocacy scholarship can rise to the level of meta-theory. Indeed, the interested observer may rightly demand of the pro-movement scholar an explanation as to how multiracial ideology is not connected firmly to the false idea of race as a biological reality, since on the ideology’s own terms two different races must be mixed together biologically in order to produce a multiracial individual, appeals to race as a social construction notwithstanding. As Senna observes somewhat sarcastically:

One of my concerns about the multiracial movement is that it buys into the idea of race as a real, biological category. It seems to see race almost as chemistry: mix black and Japanese, you get Blackanese. Mix Caucasian, black, Indian, and Asian and you get Cabilnasian. (1998: 78)

As far as purported black/white mixtures are concerned, we know that an indispensable element of such chemistry (or, I should say, alchemy) is hypodescent.
According to the US Bureau of the Census, there were 1.5 million interracial couples in 1990, 14 percent of which had one black partner (1997: 1–3). Given that race is a biological fallacy, it becomes necessary to interrogate the racial assignment of these ostensibly monoracial black partners who actually represent mixtures of various African, various European, and various Native American populations over the centuries. For many of them their African component may be no greater, and indeed may perhaps be somewhat less substantial, than their other ancestries. These individuals can be considered monoracially black only within the framework of hypodescent – a framework in which all their ancestries but the African are erased.\(^\text{12}\)

Therefore, when the assertion is made that a particular person is the black partner in an interracial couple, one can be sure that the speaker is an advocate of hypodescent. But what if the speaker is also a proponent of multiracial identity, asserting that this or that black person is the parent of a biracial child? Would not such a scenario represent an important inconsistency in terms of the general and well-publicized multiracial rejection of hypodescent as a legitimate principle? It is a question that must be asked and also answered if multiracial activists and scholars are to escape the appearance of rejecting hypodescent only in their own cases, but not in the cases of others.

Two sets of examples – first from activists, and then from intellectuals – will illustrate instances of hypodescent being bound up thus with multiracial ideology. I again want to be very clear in pointing out that multiracial advocates insist repeatedly, and in absolute terms, that they reject hypodescent. According to former AMEA president Ramona Douglass: ‘The “one drop rule” is an irrational notion born out of economic greed exploitation and repression over 200 years old. It is time to let it die once and for all in our hearts and in our minds’ (US House, 1997: 385). Yet if multiracial activists take the position that the application of hypodescent to persons with parents of European and African ancestry is unacceptable, then they should as well – for the sake of logical consistency – take the position that the application of hypodescent to Afro-Americans generally is unacceptable.

In other words, before advocates of multiracial identity assert that child X is multiracial because she has an Afro-American mother and a white father, they should be willing to assert that X’s Afro-American mother (being of European and African ancestry) is multiracial as well, as are all Afro-Americans. As long as they will not do so, or otherwise engage seriously the issue of past population mixture (and the vast majority of prominent multiracial spokespersons and scholars have done neither as yet), then multiracial ideology remains open to weighty charges of inconsistency.

Consider the confusion into which this inconsistency leads AMEA’s Carlos Fernández. Testifying before Congress, Fernández asserted that
‘many if not most ethnically-identified African Americans are “multi-racial.”’ (House, 1993a: 133). This represented a rare public admission of Afro-American heterogeneity by a multiracial leader; and, coupled with his description of hypodescent as a ‘racist rule,’ gave the impression that Fernández was attempting to deal seriously with the questions I am raising in this article (1996: 27). Yet, Fernández has also stated that ‘the census must be based on “truth and facts. And if a person has one black and a white parent, that’s a fact”’ (Waugh, 1991: B5). But if according to Fernández hypodescent is a ‘racist rule’ and ‘most Afro-Americans are multiracial,’ by what logic except hypodescent does he then determine that racial blackness is a ‘fact’? To my knowledge, Fernández has neither reconciled these conflicting positions, nor disavowed one or the other.

This ‘fact of black parents’ is essential to asserting the existence of black/white multiracial children as distinct from Afro-American children. Whether consciously or not, Fernández is engaging in a selective deployment of hypodescent in the case of Afro-American parents (despite his acknowledgment of their mixed ancestry) in order to cast them as monoracially black parents capable (when partnered with whites) of producing multiracial children.

Fernández is not the only multiracial leader who has fallen into the trap of selectively deploying hypodescent. Susan Graham, executive director of Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), relates the following experience:

My husband, who is Black, went to our local Recreation and Parks Department to enroll our five-year-old daughter in a gymnastics program . . . Our daughter was not with him. A clerk checked off ‘Black’ [on the registration form]. In other words, the clerk looked at the father and made the assumption that the child was Black . . . The point is: she was mistaken. My husband has a Multiracial child and the clerk had no way of knowing . . . The problem here is . . . the old rule of hypo-descent. (US House, 1993b: 120)

Significantly, Graham herself looks at the same father – an Afro-American of mixed heritage – and uses ‘the old rule of hypodescent’ to label him monoracially black. Like Fernández, Graham employs hypodescent in a selective manner in order to assert a multiracial identity for a child who is no more racially mixed than her father. And this is no small point, for it illustrates the logical problem inherent in constructing a multiracial identity that is conferred through the biological mating of ostensibly different races. Multiracial ideology necessarily requires biologically black people and biologically white people, along with the other fallacious racial groups, in order to posit the existence of biologically multiracial children. Graham’s husband, regardless of his mixed ancestry, is recoded as monoracially black in order that his child may be presented as multiracial. The examples provided by Fernández and Graham make clear that acceptance of
biological race as a reality, and the deployment of a selective hypodescent, are primary foundations of the multiracial argument as currently constituted. These examples also represent the challenge that theorists who are supportive of multiracial ideology must address.

To date, however, multiracial scholars – from the least rigorous to the most prominent – have uniformly avoided engaging this critical issue. For example, although Marion Kilson correctly states that ‘most African Americans are of mixed race heritage,’ she still finds it possible to describe the subjects of her study as ‘“first generation” Biracial Americans’ (2001: 6). Yet Kilson’s formulation, and others like it, is no more than a continually ignored contradiction, as Ann Morning describes:

Despite the fact that racial intermixing has taken place for centuries in the United States, today the biracial, genealogically-immediate experience seems to be our normative multiracial status, and Americans whose mixed-race ancestry is more distant do not fit our image of the multiracial population. (2000: 214)

And even though Kilson acknowledges the fallacy of biological race when asserting that ‘today there are greater differences within “races” than between them,’ she nonetheless reifies biological race by offering that ‘interracial marriages increased by more than 800% between 1960 and 1990’ (2001: 3–4). Maria Root also identifies race as a fiction, yet advances the claim that ‘interracial marriage has grown at least 500 percent since 1970’ (2001: 6). Brown reports that ‘race is not a biological problem’ (2001: 40), but still professes that interracial marriages have seen a ‘rise of 507 percent in twenty-eight years [1970–1998] (2001: 19). Similarly, Linehan points out the lack of ‘scientific consensus on the legitimacy of race as a biological classification’ (2000: 43), but he then surpasses even Kilson, Root, and Brown’s burgeoning rates of interracial marriage by positing no less than a ‘1500% increase over twenty years’ [1970–1990] (2000: 46).

For her part, Root attempts to avoid the conundrum of biological race by asserting that ‘a race, therefore, is a group that is socially defined on the basis of physical criteria’ (2001: 42). This maneuver fails to eliminate the inconsistency, though; for if we grant Root’s formulation of race as socially constructed, she is then, like Daniel, left to explain why the biological mating of persons from two different socially constructed races should result in the birth of a multiracial child. If the monoracial status of the parents is determined by the social definition of ‘physical criteria,’ then the racial status of the children should be determined by the same criteria. However, such children are held to be multiracial precisely because they are the result of biological mating. What we see here, again, is selective hypodescent, regardless of ubiquitous and transparent appeals to race as a social construction. The immediately foregoing are major logical flaws, committed by theorists as opposed to activists, and grounded in the selective application of hypodescent, that invite challenge and demand response.
Multiracial ideology becomes entangled in such philosophical and theoretical problems because it strives to posit a racially mixed population whose distinctive identity depends on the prior existence of biologically pure races. Yet, while clearly operating within and being dependent upon the American paradigm of race and hypodescent, multiracial proponents also advance the proposition that the official acknowledgment of multiracial identity would be subversive of this same American racial paradigm by unmasking its fallacies (Linehan, 2000: 71–72; Williams, 1996: 193; Wright, 1994: 48).

However, this is not a thesis that has been advanced with a requisite amount of support behind it. In Tessman’s analysis, ‘it is not clear that identifying as mixed race or multiracial does this [challenge racial purity], 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’ (1999: 289). Similarly, David Goldberg writes that ‘at best, then, the condition of mixed-race formation constitutes an ambivalent challenge to the racial condition from within the fabric of the racializing project’ (1995: 254). Melissa Nobles sees the mixed-race project as ‘a response to and a product of the rigidity and mutual exclusivity of traditional categorization: multiracial identity presupposes monoracial identities’ (2000: 133).

Supporters of the multiracial idea may try, but they cannot disengage their ideology from its reliance on biological race. For example, Daniel offers that:

the new multiracial identity belongs to individuals who feel a sense of kinship with both the black and white communities as a result of their multiple backgrounds. Their identity is not grounded in a biological notion of race but on ancestry. Exposure to ancestral backgrounds enhances and makes real their feeling of kinship. (2002: 106)

He elaborates a bit further, informing us that biological notions of race and those based on ancestry may overlap, but they are not synonymous. The former is based on one’s genetic heritage irrespective of ancestral background. The latter is grounded in the backgrounds in one’s lineage or genealogy, irrespective of genetic concerns, and is the basis of the new multiracial identity (2002: 178).

Yet scholars must do more than merely state a proposition. They must at the very least offer something in the way of explanation or proof. Daniel, however, provides nothing of the sort, leaving us to wonder precisely how his use of ‘ancestry’ is different from common notions of biological heritage. While asserting that one’s genealogy is disconnected from one’s genetic line, he nonetheless gives no persuasive argument (indeed, he gives no argument at all) as to why this should be so. And this is to be expected since multiracial identity and ideology are absolutely dependent upon biological race.
It is not at all clear how the assertion of a multiracial identity – qua a racial identity – can be subversive of the fallaciously pure races that must be (and in fact are) posited in order to give it birth. Without the American racial paradigm and hypodescent providing the necessary superstructure, it is not logically possible to articulate the idea of multiracial identity. The fact that it is nevertheless articulated is a testament to some people’s justified dissatisfaction with the monoracial paradigm. The question for the future, however, is whether it is more reasonable to address this dissatisfaction by challenging or aligning with that paradigm.

By aligning with false notions of biological race as opposed to actively contesting them, multiracial ideology becomes inextricably bound up with the racial superstructure. Because of this, racial purity and the existence of different races are not actually denied, but in fact are the necessary building blocks of the multiracial position. In the absence of some kind of refinement or rearticulation of the multiracial position, it would seem to stand as an approach that neither transcends nor subverts race, but instead operates comfortably within the bounds of the American racial paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing analysis of multiracial ideology reveals several important points. First, the claim that multiracial people represent a new and growing population in the United States is complicated significantly by the fact that there are at least 30 million people of African, Native American, and European ancestry in the United States – namely, the current Afro-American population. Historically, people of mixed ancestry have been present in North America for hundreds of years, and their descendants are far more numerous than can be accounted for under the current theoretical schema of multiracial identity. In particular, the assertion that there were a supposed mere two million multiracial children in American in 1990 – a figure derived through the selective application of hypodescent – illustrates the difficulty inherent in attempting to distinguish, in a logically consistent way, people of African and European descent today from people of African and European descent yesterday.

Second, the assertion that multiracial identity is subversive of the American racial paradigm does not withstand scrutiny. Although the claim may appear compelling on the surface, it does not survive logical challenge. Not only does multiracial ideology as currently conceptualized fail to threaten the monoracial paradigm; it is fundamentally dependent on that paradigm for its own expression, as the selective application of hypodescent continuously reproduces a fictitiously monoracial black population capable of serving as parents of multiracial children.
Unless intellectuals who favor the multiracial position strive to seriously come to grips with these and similar issues, multiracial identity politics will struggle to advance beyond the shallow coverage offered by *Time* and *Newsweek*; with the result that the meta-theoretical work exemplified by writers critical of the multiracial movement will remain alone in providing the ontological assessment of multiracial ideology. An opposing paradigm would provide a welcome opportunity for all sides to engage in positive and rigorous dialectic; however, it is incumbent upon the scholarly proponents of multiracial ideology to first deal with those significant inconsistencies that prevent them from assuming their places at the meta-theoretical debate table.

The controversy and agitation surrounding multiracial identity will no doubt continue as long as race remains a contentious issue in the United States. It will also continue to receive occasional attention from the popular media. However, as more and more scholars examine the multiracial question with critical as opposed to sentimental eyes, we can hope that the general debate will be enriched and that a more informed public discussion will ensue. The long history of those people known variously throughout America's existence as mulattoes, quadroons, and octoroons deserves no less.

**Notes**

1 Race terms in this article are always a reference to people’s misguided belief in the biologically fallacious American racial paradigm. Race is a social construction, but I part with many colleagues in refusing to label it a social reality, which I see as implying something very different. Racism does exist, as did at one time the Roman Inquisition; however, race, like the geocentric universe, does not. Given that this article concerns the notions of racially distinct and racially mixed people in the United States, my use of such terms in some instances is necessary as I endeavor to map the new and still shifting terrain of multiracial theorizing. Race terms in this article – including multiracial and biracial – should always be read as if preceded by the words so-called.

2 The two anthologies by Maria Root (1992, 1996), and the anthology by Naomi Zack (1995b), are the most widely known of these works.

3 I am aware that some advocates of multiracial ideology assert that race is a social construction and not a biological reality, or attempt to create a false distinction between biology and ancestry. Nonetheless, they cannot escape the necessary implication of their own ideology, which is that biological sexual relations between persons of ostensibly different races is what produces multiracial individuals.

4 For an historical analysis of whiteness as a property right in North America see Harris (1993).

5 For additional legalistic arguments in support of a mixed-race identifier see Zack (1998: ch. 3); and Linehan (2000).

6 In addition to their roles as scholars, Daniel and Williams are active proponents
of multiracial identity politics. Zack, who is perhaps the premier scholar of mixed-race issues today, although supporting some aspects of US federal multiracial recognition has not embraced those politics in quite the same way. Zack is without question a meta-theorist of multiracial identity.

7 Internal miscegenation refers to the gene flow that occurs when someone with mixed ancestry procreates. Generally speaking, when any Afro-American procreates (whether with another Afro-American or not) European genetic material is potentially passed on to the resulting child. My reference to gene flow and genetic material here should not be read as an endorsement of biological race, but rather as a more exacting description of population mixture. When sub-Saharan West Africans and Northern Europeans mixed in seventeenth-century North America, it was not the mixing of distinct and exclusive racial groups, but the mixing of human populations (and their genes) that had been relatively isolated from each other for an extremely long period of time. Over the course of the intervening centuries, direct and internal miscegenation have assured that the gene pools of Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans are no longer isolated. For more on internal miscegenation see Davis (1991: 22–23).

8 The Loving decision struck down the remaining anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. Although some states retained their laws, the statutes effectively became unenforceable. Alabama, a gallant holdout, finally rescinded its anti-miscegenation law in 2000.

9 In fact, in attempting to argue for a distinctive multiracial identity and consciousness, Daniel offers as evidence several supposed multiracial ‘linguistic’ and ‘ritual’ practices that are, quite frankly, simply not serious (2002: 115–116).

10 I want here to make explicit reference to my use of the term mulatto in this article. One example of the numerous inaccuracies surrounding the multiracial identity debate is the fact that many multiracial activists object to the word mulatto because, they say, it is derived from the Spanish word mulo (for little mule), and is therefore a derogatory term. This complaint is inaccurate, however. As Jack Forbes has shown, mulatto is derived from the Arabic word muwallad, meaning someone of partial Arab ancestry. Forbes demonstrates that the root of mulatto has nothing to do with mules but rather ‘has the special meaning of being born among Arabs and covers all persons (mixed-bloods included) who are not perceived as being originally of “old” Arab ancestry’ (Forbes, 1993: 145).

11 ‘Cablinasian’ (Caucasian/black/Indian/Asian) is a term that professional golfer Tiger Woods has in the past used to describe himself.

12 While true that the US Bureau of the Census’s parental data has been self-reported, it is nonetheless the reporting of a false consciousness. It is particularly problematic to validate the move from the differential self-reported social designations of parents to the assignation of biracial identity to a child based on the biological mating of those parents.
**References**


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