

P R E F A C E



FROM BIRACIAL TO MULTIRACIAL TO MIXED-RACE TO CRITICAL MIXED-RACE STUDIES

In the autumn of 1992, I arrived at the oldest dorm on Brown University's campus, a stately, crumbling edifice complete with ivy-covered walls and cinder-block lined rooms that rebelled against my efforts to tack up my leftie political posters and batik-print tapestry. I was a nervous kid outfitted in meticulously ripped jeans, tan Birkenstocks, and a lingering fear that an admissions officer was going to pop out at any moment and announce that there had been a big mistake: I, the daughter of a secretary and a mechanic, really was not allowed into this hallowed Ivy League institution. Class and race, and my exhausting efforts to avoid talking about both, structured my life. While class remained a more-easily submergible entity in neo-bohemian, grunge-accented Providence of the early 1990s, the changing signs and signals of race glowed and blinked like my own personal fluorescent sign. I worried that my racially ambiguous but clearly nonwhite looks made me hypervisible, and before going to college I bobbed and weaved the ubiquitous "what are you?" questions, to save myself from having to reveal what I shrugged off as my race story.

My efforts to remain race neutral were supported by my utter lack of language to begin to chip away at the race question. Before college I had never uttered "multiracial." "Mixed" was the term we used inside my suburban Virginia house and

“biracial” seemed popular with outsiders referring to me. But even within the confines of my immediate family, those terms were not my own: they were monoracially applied descriptors that did not quite match up with my interior racialized self. At Brown I found myself embraced by the vibrant community of students of color and given the language to understand that my unique racialization was not all that special, a revelation that was a complete and total relief. I soon learned of the term *multiracial* as an “us” term, one applied by mixed-race people in the process of self-identification. To me it quickly meant community; it meant not having to define myself further; it meant having a safe space to collectively articulate my frustration with the outside world’s confusion about my phenotype. As a first-semester first-year confronted with the new-to-me term “multiracial,” I embraced it immediately. At seventeen, I could not have imagined that that word would enter my daily, even hourly, vocabulary over the next four years at college. In the United States during the twenty-first century, racialized labels are just as multiple, contentious, and slippery as they were during the twentieth century, but for me, that new word, “multiracial,” and that alone, felt just perfect. Just as Stuart Hall became black in Jamaica of the 1960s with the advent of Black Nationalism in the United States, I became multiracial in New England of the 1990s with the advent of the multiracial student movement on my liberal college campus.¹ I was privately mixed for the first seventeen years of my life until I publically came out as multiracial.

My initiation into the world of multiraciality came about at the Third World Center (TWC) whose moniker bore its 1960s activist roots. There I learned of the Brown Organization of Multiracial and Biracial Students (BOMBS), a group that some student leaders had started two years earlier. When Brown’s paradigm-shifting minority student orientation, the Third World Transition Program (TWTTP), asked participants to break out into racial affinity group sessions, a number of multiracial first-years had felt split about where to go. So they created their own multiracial affinity group, which eventually became BOMBS. When I was first introduced to the group I remember immediately loving the implied destruction in the group’s name, which was so counter to the other blandly multicultural student group names I would come to be familiar with, such as, “prism” or “mosaic.” As my coming into a multiracial consciousness did nothing less than explode my earlier attempts at racial neutrality, BOMBS resonated with my mixed-racial epistemology.

We modeled our organization after the university's existing racial support and advocacy student groups, such as the Organization of United African Peoples (OUAP), the Asian American Students Association (AASA), and the Latin-American Students Organization (LASO), which modeled themselves after traditional civil rights groups. BOMBS meetings took place in the warm embrace of the TWC, in community with other students-of-color groups. In order to populate our meetings in those early pre-email days, BOMBS members rounded up recruits by official means, including posting fliers for the group around the campus cafeterias and unofficially by slyly approaching the racially ambiguous dormmate down the hall. In September of 1991, a year before I arrived at Brown, BOMBS put out its first flier:²

BOMBS!

Brown Organization of Multi- and Biracial Students

This is an organization especially designed for any and all persons who have ever felt left out or marginalized by members of groups to which they partly or wholly belong. Our organization is intended as a support group for bi/multiracial or multicultural people who have in the past been forced to "choose" between the different races and cultures that are parts of their identities.

In the past, we have been ignored and treated as though we were invisible, solely because we have always been defined in terms of OTHER people. NO MORE. The reason why our people have been ignored throughout history is because there has never been any sort of political base or forum from which to make our voices heard and to raise society's awareness of our existence. Presently, organizations like ours have been springing up at college campuses NATIONWIDE. Why? Because our numbers are growing. With the absence of anti-miscegenation laws since 1967, and the consequences thereof, THERE ARE MORE OF US THAN EVER BEFORE. Even the U.S. government has been forced to sit up and take notice of us, as they are being pressured to include us as a separate category on the year 2000 census forms.

Why do we say "our people"? Because, like members of other recognized racial groups in this country, our people DO have a common experience from which to draw unity and solidarity. Not only do we feel the same racism from the white majority as do our other Third World brothers and sisters, but we get it from them as well. We refuse to sit by

and be ignored any longer. We are the invisible minority within a minority, but this is about to CHANGE.

WE EXIST. WE ARE HERE AMONG YOU.

WE ARE A POLITICAL PRESSURE COOKER ABOUT TO EXPLODE.

join us.

1ST ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING:

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 7:00 PM

1ST FLOOR OF THE TWC.

SEE YOU THERE.

The “we,” the “us,” the “our,” the all caps were intoxicating to me, and to my cohort, a newly formed group of multiracial subjects. Both idealism and budding militancy were apparent. When I showed the flier from September 1991 to BOMBS members in 2009, they told me that its dramatic “old-school” style sounded markedly different from their own less politicized rhetoric. We were a first-generation movement and, as such, we were emphatic about defining ourselves with each other and against “whole” race, or monoracially identified people. We used what was even then old-fashioned language of oppositionality to stake a claim of victim status. We believed our multiracial identification was new, radical, and incendiary. Later I learned that various multiracial peoples had indeed collaborated, and colluded, in other places and times. For example, elite mixed-race people, deemed variously “black,” “mulatto,” or “colored” by white society, helped cement African American color and class distinctions by creating a “beige-ocracy,” to use the word of the founding multiracial studies historian Paul Spickard.³

But this type of a privileged legacy was not apparent to us, those born in the early 1970s to race-traitor parents just a handful of years after the *Loving v. Virginia* decision decriminalized interracial marriage in 1967. BOMBS’s first newsletter bears evidence of this particular history and our sense that we were pioneers:

If a multiracial organization gets off the ground, it has the potential to be very powerful. We know that there are a lot of us out there, but the problem has always been that we have never identified ourselves as a separate group. We have always been either in limbo or forced to choose sides. Hasn’t it always been hard for you, multiracial friend, to define your own identity because others felt obligated to choose it for

you? No more. This organization is important because it will allow us to have a separate space for multiracials, where we can define ourselves in terms of ourselves, and not in terms of other groups. What we need are committed people willing to stick together and carve a niche for ourselves at this university so that our voices can be heard. Previous attempts at starting and maintaining similar organizations in the past have failed, but only because of lack of support or commitment. But we know that you're all out there (we've seen you). Don't just wish us luck. Come join, bond—unite!

Reading these words so many years later, I can see how this racially provocative organization spoke so eloquently to kids like me, the multiracially awkward soul wading through late adolescence in the early 1990s. One phrase that particularly jumps out to me is “we’ve seen you.” I wonder now: Is it an observation? A lure? A threat? A wink from one insider to another? The writers assumed that we racial outsiders shared multiracial pain and exclusion and the concomitant desire to become visible, a desire to become racially legible, named, and claimed. To exchange status as “them” for “us.” Their rhetoric asserted that group identity alone would create a space for our support and resistance.

These two documents from the 1991–92 school year represent the very beginning of BOMBS. They were the founding documents that I pored over as a first-year. I joined and began attending weekly meetings, later planning those meetings and leading the organization forward. As multiracial student activists, we were struck by the sense that we were doing something new and different in the very old world of race. In BOMBS I found a community of fellow self-described racial outsiders. Regulars tended to be people like my late-teenage self, whose self-identity was bound up in those three little words, not a romantic “I love you,” but an incredulous “what are you?” Through conversations at BOMBS I understood that I didn’t have to answer that question the way the asker intended. That I could turn the question around on my interrogator: why do you want to know? That I could identify in an unsatisfyingly nebulous way. Although I never personally described myself as “human” or “American” as some of my fellow BOMBS members defiantly did, I gave annoyingly nebulous answers such as “woman of color” that allowed me to provide a politicized response and yet avoid laying bare my personal history. I relished being able to resist “what are you?,” which to me was akin to avoiding opening a vein to the

genealogy that might logically explain my oddly racialized looks. Nestled within the protective cocoon of the TWC, BOMBS allowed me the space to resist racialization by performing a multiracial identity.

Resist and perform I did! Multiracialism simply obsessed me at Brown. I read, discussed, wrote about, and challenged everything and anything having to do with mixed-raciality. In my sophomore year, I became one of the second sets of co-chairs of BOMBS. I hosted forums such as “Hair Issues,” a deliberation for women of color on the relationship between gender, racial authenticity, and hair. Not to be outdone by traditional student race groups, we began Multiracial Heritage Week. We brought mixed-race speakers, professionally multiracial folks, such as the journalist Lisa Jones, the author and the daughter of the African American writer and activist Amiri Barks (Leroi Jones), and the white, Jewish writer Hettie Jones; academics, such as the philosopher Naomi Zack; and comedians, such as Amy Hill. Intrigued by the vast number of mixed-race women at Brown who did not necessarily identify with the term *multiracial* or even each other, I worked with Sachi Cunningham, my friend and one of the founders of BOMBS, to create *Mixed Girls*, a documentary that examined mixed-race women’s perceptions of and reactions to their own multiraciality.⁴ I became the undergraduate teaching assistant for an anthropology course called “Growing Up Ethnic and Multicultural” and co-designed the curriculum for a Group Independent Study Project, “Multiraciality in the United States,” where we examined the “multiracial movement’s” founding texts from the late 1980s to early 1990s.

While in the early days of BOMBS we took our political cues from civil rights and racial nationalist groups, we took our naming and identity cues from authors in the emerging multiracial movement, many of whom identified as mixed-race, and all of whom distanced themselves from past work pathologizing interracial relationships and multiracial people. In the early 1990s, we read the historians Paul Spickard’s *Mixed Blood* (1989) and F. James Davis’s *Who Is Black?* (1991), the psychologist Maria Root’s anthology *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992), and the philosopher Naomi Zack’s *Race and Mixed Race* (1994). The most influential of these scholars to the multiracial movement was Root, who has argued vehemently that mixed-race people have a nearly constitutional right to self-identify and even deserve their own bill of rights.⁵ With a new body of work in multiracial studies came the choice of terminology not frequently in circulation before: “multiracial,” and then, following a similar move-

ment of scholarship in the United Kingdom, “mixed-race.” As a first- and second-year college student, I found these books thrilling because they defended, named, and historicized my own existence.

Mixed-race was the object of my personal, political, and academic study—a full-blown preoccupation. I learned as much as I could about the history, literature, and racialization of mixed-race folks. Through *BOMBS*, my haven of the TWC, TWTP, all of the various programs supporting students of color, and my coursework in American civilization, then Afro American (now Africana) studies, semiotics, literature history, and sociology. I also learned about larger questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and, most importantly, power. I learned that racialized choice, a key value of the multiracial movement, was not an option for most, while racialized conscription, which we special mixies fought against, was. I learned about structural racism and how to explore the lived realities of race, from differential rates of homeownership, healthcare, and high school graduation rates, among other measures. Consequently, I soon found that questions of power were largely absent from early multiracial movement literature. I found myself questioning: what happened after we created our own terms? Outside of fulfilling one’s own self-identity desires or sating the curiosities of onlookers, what does a term that provides an “accurate” account of “what mixes?” or “what percentages?” reveal? What happens after the missing story is told, or the incorrect story is righted? What happens after we join the table? And most importantly, were we reinforcing the racial order rather than blowing it up?

These budding questions converged in my senior year at Brown when I wrote a thesis on the representations of a cross-section of mixed-race women in magazine advertisements, a study that drew on the multiracial, interdisciplinary track I had been pursuing. I identified two dialectics of representation, “crossover/spice” and “beauty/beast” and argued that these advertisements overwhelmingly sought to categorize and exoticize mixed-race women, demonstrating discomfort with miscegenation and multiracials themselves. Even though my study, in retrospect, was overly ambitious, methodologically questionable, and incoherently written in places (in my attempt to sound similar to the theory I fought to comprehend), researching and writing in a new scholarly area was so exciting that I realized that I wanted to make a career out of my questioning. I wanted to be an academic who studied multiraciality.

Over the course of my four years at Brown I learned that the “what

are you?” question that so plagued me and that I initially identified as solely the lot of multiracial folks like me, was actually the lot of all people who did not appear to belong, whether through race, gender, sexuality, or ability status. This idea has percolated more over the years, as has the notion of cross-identity, or perhaps more specifically to use the words of Stuart Hall, “cross-identification connections.”⁶ I’ve been traveling from the questions “who is mixed-race?” to “what does mixed-race mean?” to “how do people use mixed-race?” to “why is it important to name, understand, and unpack mixed race?” These questions led to the topic that became a central concern of this book: the attempted silencing and demeaning of the blackness in mixed-race blackness, a pernicious dynamic that did not appear to pollute all representations of the nonwhite aspects of multiracial Asian Americans, Latinos, and American Indians.

In my final year as an undergraduate I became disillusioned with the utopian promises of multiracial studies and activism. They seemed so focused solely on naming and claiming a multiracial identity, and that was no longer enough for me. Things just seemed more complicated than that. One moment of revelation came to me while chatting with a white woman who attended a BOMBS public event: I was alarmed to hear that she came to learn how to obtain a nonblack identity for her mixed-race African American preschool-aged daughter. I was even more alarmed later to learn that she was not alone; the political scientist Kim Williams investigated mothers just like this on the nationwide scale. Williams found that the leaders and participants of multiracial advocacy groups were overwhelmingly white women married to black men. The most famous of these women is Susan Graham, founder of Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally), who led the fight for the multiracial category on the census, and even had her young son testify before Congress, so that he did not have to identify as black.⁷

Graham and other well-known spokespeople in the multiracial moment identified multiracialness as the only possible form of racial identification, which simultaneously pathologized blackness, apparently unrepentantly. From this type of multiracial activism, and not from the type of minority-based community articulated by BOMBS, sprang the so-called 1990s-era multiracial agenda, with the first item being the establishment of a new census category. Arguments for color blindness and against race-based measures such as affirmative action, which began to be dismantled across the country immediately after I graduated from college, accompa-

nied this embrace of “the multiracial cause.”⁸ For example, in the mid-to-late 1990s, Newt Gingrich, the former Republican Speaker of the House, aligned himself with a so-called multiracial cause, and supported such measures as the addition of a “multiracial” category on the 2000 U.S. Census, which was, much to the chagrin of multiracial activists, defeated in lieu of a “mark one or more” option. Because of these strange collaborations I began questioning the politicians’, the media’s, and even my own embrace of multiracialism. Was love of mixed-race people really love, or was it a disguised hatred of monoracial African Americans, a form of coded antiblack racism?

The antiblack racism in the multiracial movement from the 1990s did not fit with my multiracial college activism, and yet it stuck with me. It unsettled me to understand how politicians and the media manipulated multiracialism into an alignment of “my people” with the politics of the Far Right. Understanding the split dividing national multiracial advocacy groups from college-based activists helped me see why some of my closest friends around the country, who were mixed black and white and who grew up with close ties to African American communities, didn’t want anything to do with this multiracial thing. Why weren’t their stories a part of the burgeoning narrative of mixed-race? Other questions loomed for me: In our celebrations of mixed-race, were we excluding or dismissing the experiences, histories, and racializations of other minoritized communities? How could multiracialism work to dismantle and not fortify the privileges of whiteness? How could we articulate our agenda in a way that might forge cross-racial coalitions, instead of separations?

After I left college I began to answer many of my questions on the utility of mixed-race through the writings of the essayist Lisa Jones in her book *Bulletproof Diva* (1994). I had read Jones’s essays initially in her column in the *Village Voice*, and I thought about them time and again as I developed my own multiracial research agenda. Jones captured the “what are you?” question—the variety of ways in which mixed-race people are often questioned because of their “racially ambiguous looks”—better than anyone had managed to do:

Who are you, what are you, where are you from, no, where are you really from, where are your parents from, are your grandparents Americans? Are you from here, what’s your background, what’s your nationality, where do you live? Are you black, are you white, do you speak

Spanish? Are you really white, are you really black? Are you Puerto Rican, are you half and half, are you biracial, multiracial, interracial, transracial, racially unknown, race neutral, colorless, colorblind, down with the rat race and the human race? Who are you? Where are you coming from? Who are your people?

She helped me understand that the “what are you?” question and all its permutations mark mixed-race people as either pathological or extraordinary, the object-like “what” or exotic and desirous “who.”

At another level, I would encounter popular representations of multiracial people in memoirs, novels, television shows, and films that were equally dim about who and what multiracial people might be. Like most people, I instinctively read texts against lived experiences, and in the case of multiracial African Americans, the representations do not reflect the true complexity of lives. For years, from teaching high school English in Miami to studying ethnic studies in graduate school in San Diego to teaching difference and communication courses in Seattle, I have struggled to accept the limitations of representations of multiracial African Americans. I have wanted to find resistant counternarratives that echoed the rich diversity of experiences and racialized identifications that multiracial people have, from identifying with one monoracial identity, to two or more monoracial identities, to a race not in his or her own background, to “multiracial” as a category, to all of the above. But what I’ve come back to over and over for the case of mixed-race blackness is the failure of the representative landscape to meet the experiential one.

The experiential landscape is what has inspired *Transcending Blackness*. My readings in this book wouldn’t be possible without all of the experiences I have enjoyed with a vibrant community of organic and trained intellectuals and activists. Because this project began with BOMBS, I must begin by thanking the people who powered BOMBS, especially Sachi Cunningham, Mike Hurt, Dean Karen McLaurin, and Jason Sperber, and who powered me through BOMBS, including Praveen Fernandes, Jeffery Mingo, Heather Reid, and Jim Wallace. My BOMBS critique was crying out for a frame, and at the University of California, San Diego, my professors Jane Rhodes, Daphne Brooks, Yen Espiritu, Nicole King, Ross Frank, and George Lipsitz opened up new worlds of ethnic and cultural studies to frame my ideas. Cherise Smith, Sarita Cannon and Lisa Ze Winters—members of the East Bay dissertation-writing group—beautifully mod-

eled ethical, positive scholarship and provided the support necessary for me to finish my dissertation—and they along with Allison, Mike, Alonzo, and Ava Marie Smith keep me longing for Oakland. At the University of Washington, WIRED (Women Investigating Race, Ethnicity, and Difference) has bolstered me through many a long, gray day, and I want to thank all the members of our collective for making Seattle an intellectually and personally productive space; my WIRED writing group, LeiLani Nishime, Habiba Ibrahim, and Tyina Steptoe for validating and pushing my work; and Luis Fraga for his support of WIRED. My students, including Manoucheka Celeste, Madhavi Murty, Elizabeth Cortez, Anjali Vats, Kate Bell, Kris Mroczek, Jennifer McClearn, Tabitha Bronsma, Jamie Moshin, Vanessa Au, Monique Lacoste, Camille Elmore-Trummer, Desireé Boyd, Michelé Prince, Juana Reid, and the Barbados crew, helped this work to come alive in the classroom. My colleagues Crispin Thurlow, Christine Harold, Leah Ceccarelli, Valerie Manusov, Jerry Baldasty, David Domke, Michelle Habell-Pallan, Sonnet Retman, Angela Ginorio, Judy Howard, Andrea Griggs, and Lea Vaughn warmly welcomed me into the uw fold. A special thanks for the pedis and pep talks with my Seattle sisters, Janine Jones, Alexis Harris, and Joy Williamson-Lott; raucous laughter with Wadiya Udell; coffee shop work dates with Jen Neighbors; and family fun with the Kalbach-Udells, LaBordes, Fabers, Joneses, Bonney-Retmans, Espanias, and Wu-Floyds. A variety of fellowships provided me with the time and space to think, including the American Association of University Women, the University of California President's Fellowship, the Ford Foundation, and the Woodrow Wilson Career Enhancement Fellowship. When my faith in this project waned, the advice, support, and critique of Daphne Brooks, Matt Jacobson, Laura Helper-Ferris, Ken Wissoker, and my two anonymous reviewers rocketed me through my revisions. Thank you to Shosanna Weinberger for allowing her incredible image to grace the cover of the book. I will be forever grateful to the University of Washington's Whiteley Center for providing me with the most beautiful space in the world to think and write. Much love to my families the Landwehrs, Captains, D'Souzas, Whites, and Scanlans. My utmost appreciation to the people who encouraged me to ask too many questions: my parents, Richard and Irene Landwehr, and Grandpi, Jesse Meeks.

Most of all, I thank James, TJ, and Naima Joseph for endlessly embracing their spacey partner and mama. We live this book every day. Questions, comments, compliments, complaints, and jokes about multiraciality are

an integral part of our everyday lives. I am a multiracial woman, partnered with a multiracial man, and together we have two multigenerationally mixed-race children. Our children are racialized quite differently from each other: our caramel-complexioned son is read as “minority” (although racially ambiguous to many), while our ringleted, olive-skinned daughter is read, for the most part, as white. When I registered my son for kindergarten in the Seattle public school system, the older African American woman who took my registration forms (none of which, surprisingly, asked for race) looked at me and at the required picture of him that I presented along with his birth certificate and entered “black” for our boy. Our girl has been racialized by the system as well: after she became ill at her preschool, a paramedic filling out his routine paperwork noted her as “white.” But what would have happened if either of these events had occurred after a beach-heavy July in San Diego instead of a house-heavy February in Seattle? Our “race” switches with the seasons and with geography. We, as a family, work to normalize and concretize our discussions of race and mixed-race that have made their way into every page here. This book is dedicated to them, my own race-conscious, race-shifting, racially plural family, who are my inspiration, support, and favorite distraction.