

July 1, 2010

On June 12 and 13, 2010, my wife [Julia](#) and I had a wonderful experience at the 3rd annual [Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival](#) in Los Angeles. Mere words cannot express my appreciation for the tireless efforts of Fanshen, Heidi, Jennifer, Rayme and others for hosting such a fantastic event—in such an expensive city as Los Angeles—that is *entirely free of charge* to attendees. In addition to the festival, Fanshen and Heidi are the hosts of [Mixed Chicks Chat](#), the only live weekly show about being racially and culturally mixed—which is also free. For just over three years and 160 episodes, Fanshen and Heidi have enlightened, inspired, and educated listeners about all aspects of the multiracial experience. No one else does it... No one else comes close.

The events at the festival have been the highlight of my year so far. The only exception at the festival would be the premiere of Carolyn Battle Cochrane's provocatively titled *I'm Biracial... Not Black Damn It-part 2: Setting the record straight-perceptions and misconceptions*.

Labeled falsely as a documentary, Cochrane continues with her polemic (after her first *I'm Biracial... Not Black Damn It*) by interviewing—and manipulating—several young adults of “mixed” (white/black) parentage to essentially get them to describe how miserable they think their lives are because they claim they are often forced to “pass” as “black” instead of identifying as “biracial.” For a festival that celebrates the “mixed-race” experience, I can truly say that only the screening of D. W. Griffith's 1915 silent film classic [Birth of a Nation](#) would have been a worse movie to watch.

Unfortunately unlike *Birth of A Nation*, Cochrane's *I'm Biracial... Not Black Damn It* is not a silent film. Nowhere in the film—which is 85 minutes too long—does the director interview, acknowledge or cite the work of accomplished scholars in the field of multiracial identity. Filmed in New York City, the home of New York University, City University of New York, Columbia, etc., it would seem quite easy to include a scholar or two to provide insight or balance during the discussions, but they are nowhere to be found. This would have been quite helpful after hearing one of the film's subjects describe how his white mother would refuse to describe the ethnicity of his estranged father as black. As if any other ethnicity was preferable to black. Since [Dr. Maria P. P. Root's](#) groundbreaking 1992 anthology [Racially Mixed People in America](#)—which was one of the first pieces of academic literature about racially mixed people *by* racially mixed people—there is now a huge body of work available to read to provide guidance to teachers, historians, legal experts, psychologists, sociologists *and movie directors*. Surely by now, every advocate for mixed race identity has at least heard of Dr. Root's [Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage](#), which asserts the right of ‘mixed race’ people:

- To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify.
- To identify myself differently than how my parents identify me.
- To identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters.
- To identify myself differently in different situations.

Nowhere in the film is the viewer given a sociological or historical perspective on [hypodescent](#) (the “[one-drop rule](#)”) that has and continues to classify anyone with any discernible African heritage—no matter how small—as “black.” When one of her male subjects states that: “his black friends consider him black, and uh... his white friends consider him.... black.”—which evoked laughter from the audience—Cochrane misses an opportunity to provide viewers with insight into the

persistence of the “one-drop rule” in the dawn of the 21st century and the omnipresent reminder that race is a social construction. Comments from a noted scholar such as [Nikki Khanna Sherwin](#) (University of Vermont) would have been invaluable. Her recent article, [“If You’re Half Black, You’re Just Black”: Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule](#) provides an excellent assessment on racial identity among a group of mixed-race individuals. It would have been nice to see Cochrane, for at least a moment or two, ask her subjects if they had ever embraced an identity that transcended race rather than continually engage in an internal/external dichotomous battle of black versus white; black or white; or black *and* white.

Cochrane’s message is loud, clear... and arrogant when she says in a [July 24, 2009 interview in *Mixed Child*](#):

“I’m not going to pass for black to make people comfortable—it’s not going to happen. This woman is the core of who I am. I’m supposed to deny her because people are uncomfortable with that - you can kiss my ass.”

Nowhere in the film was mention made of the fact, despite the insidiousness of the “one-drop” rule, that it also had the effect of creating solidarity among *all* peoples of African descent (regardless of admixture) through the bleakest periods of [Jim Crow segregation](#). Cochrane seems to have forgotten that many of the historical leaders who championed for the rights and dignity of Black Americans were in fact “biracial.” No mention is made of individuals such as NAACP co-founder [W. E. B. Du Bois](#); or former NAACP executive secretary [Walter White](#), whose fair complexion, hair and blue eyes permitted him to pass as white—for the benefit of Black Americans—to document the horrors of lynchings in the South.

There is a significant amount of literature in the field to show that, despite Cochrane’s protestations, Black Americans are more accepting of interracial relations and multiracial children than any other demographic group. In the [latest report](#) from the *Pew Research Center*...

Black respondents are somewhat more accepting of all forms of intermarriage than are White or Hispanic respondents. More than seven-in-ten blacks (72%) say it would be fine with them if a family member chose to marry someone who was white, Hispanic or Asian. By contrast, 61% of whites and 63% of Hispanics say they would be fine with a family member marrying someone from any of the other groups.

Nowhere in the film is the viewer presented with the history of so-called racial classifications, which were created by European colonists; in short, to justify the extermination of Indians and the enslavement of Africans. The viewer is also never reminded that it was those same European—not African—descendants who created and enforced the “one-drop” rule that still affects our lives today. What *might* have been a positive documentary portraying the possible benefits of embracing a multiracial, biracial or non-racial identity—Fanshen Cox and Heidi Durrow remind us of this each week—ends up being nothing more than a rant against people (particularly Black Americans) suspected of viewing a multiracial identity as a way to flee the stigma of blackness. Cochrane *might* have cited [Frank D. Bean](#) and [Jennifer Lee’s](#) 2009 article, [Plus ça Change? Multiraciality and the Dynamics of Race Relations in the United States](#) where they state that:

“...The articles by Binning, Unzueta, Huo, and Molina (2009) and by Townsend, Markus, and Bergsieker (2009) showed the positive benefits that accrue when multiracial individuals are free to

claim their multiracial backgrounds. Binning et al. (2009), for example, found that multiracial students who identify multiracially demonstrate higher levels of psychological and organizational well-being than multiracial students who identify with a single racial group... .The message in these articles is clear: when multiracial individuals are given the freedom to identify multiracially rather than being forced to identify with only one racial category, and they perceive little conflict with and distance from their identities, they display higher levels of psychological adjustment...”

In a July 29, 2002 article in the University of Vermont’s *The Vermont Connections Journal*, titled [*Fluid...: Identity in the Making*](#), writer Amiko Matsumoto describes her feelings after attempting to answer the infamous “What are you?” question when she says:

When it did, I would feel like I had done something wrong, that I had failed, and that I should do more to explain myself. I wanted to be understood so badly that I sometimes tried to deny part of who I was in order to more successfully fit into someone’s perception of who I should be. But a few years ago, all of that changed. It wasn’t an overnight decision for me, but rather a process that was the result of many conversations, confrontations, and tears. At some point during my time in Burlington, I became comfortable with my biracial identity. More than comfortable, I became proud...

And then she states:

...I now see fluid identity as a strength. I like being able to move in and out of different communities, being able to express the cultural characteristics of my surroundings without much thought. Perhaps the best example of this came a few years ago while I was in line at Disneyland with a few friends. The women ahead of us were exchange students from Japan. We talked for the forty-five minutes or so it took to get on the roller coaster, and when we got off the ride, my friends commented on how I “became Japanese” as I talked with the students. “Your sentence structure changed. You bowed your head a lot. It was like you became a different person. Do you always do that around Japanese people?” Their questions truly caught me off guard, not because I felt insecure in who they perceived me to be, but because I really hadn’t noticed I did that. Fluid identity is just as it sounds: the ability to identify in a way that takes into account the cultural currents and adjust accordingly. The issues it raises permeate all aspects of who I am...

If Cochrane had taken a different trajectory for the film, instead of the combative approach she seems to relish, she might have titled it *I’m Biracial... and Happy* and succeeded in creating a project worthy of representing the positive aspects of asserting a multiracial identity.

Since the director and the film’s subjects claim they are “tired of feeling forced to ‘pass’ as black” by Black Americans, it would seem fair to spend a few minutes of the film to examine the underlying reasons for those attitudes. It would also be incumbent upon the director to examine the attitudes held by White Americans towards ‘mixed-race’ people, and attempt to explain Nevada Senator Harry Reid’s “articulate light-skinned Negro” comments in reference to then presidential candidate Barack Obama. What *I’m Biracial* could have also explored were the reasons—contemporary and historically—for the occasional antipathy towards a biracial people by Black Americans. Just a few paragraphs from [G. Reginald Daniel’s](#) magnificent monograph, [*More Than Black? Multiracial Identity and the New Racial Order*](#), would have enlightened not only the director and her subjects, but her audience as well. In the very first paragraph of chapter eight, “The Illusion of Inclusion: From White Domination to White Hegemony,” Dr. Daniel states:

African American concerns surrounding multiracial identity are not limited to the potential impact it may have on the collection of data needed to support civil rights claims and the tracking of racial discrimination. There are also fears that multiracial identity will undermine the solidarity of African-descent Americans, as “[passing](#)”, [blue-vein societies](#), Louisiana Creoles of color, and [tri-racial isolate](#) communities have done. Those multiracial identity projects were products of prevailing Eurocentrism and were responsible for a divisive and pernicious “colorism” among African-descent Americans that has historically driven a wedge between the black masses and the privileged few, who have historically tended to be disproportionately made up of individuals who display more visible European ancestry.

It is worth noting that Daniel’s *More Than Black?* is one of the best monographs on the topic of black/white multiraciality in the Americas and should be, in my humble opinion, required reading for any student (or aspiring movie director) of the ‘mixed-race’ experience. His interdisciplinary approach, combining both sociology and history, is a classic destined to guide and inform readers for years to come. In *More Than Black?*, Daniel covers topics in our 500-year racial project such as: the origins of Eurocentrism, the rise of multiracial consciousness, the creation of the multiracial identity movement, a vision of a new racial (or raceless) paradigm and more.

I’m Biracial reveals Cochrane’s determination to lead her subjects to respond only to the questions *she* wants to ask, only in the way *she* wants them to answer. Unlike the film, [What Are You? A Dialogue on Mixed Race](#) (which was screened at the festival last year), where director Mike Peden provided his subjects with the freedom to describe their stories in their own way, Cochrane reveals she has no artistic integrity whatsoever. In one scene, Cochrane begins to ask one of the young adults his feelings about a “hypothetical” person of mixed parentage who had decided to identify exclusively as black. When the respondent starts to give a response that is not to Cochrane’s liking, she changes the question to one about a person of mixed parentage, raised by white people who *still* decides to identify exclusively as black... and who also happens to get himself elected president of the United States.

Cochrane saves her most potent diatribe for President Barack Obama. [President Obama](#) filled out his census form on March 29, 2010. (View photograph [here](#).) Four days later, the President *voluntarily* [disclosed](#) that he had opted to check only the ‘black’ box for racial identity on question number 9.

For most Americans, Obama’s choice seemed unsurprising for a man who has identified as African-American his entire life. For others, particularly those of ‘mixed-race’ or for parents and relatives of individuals who are ‘mixed-race’, his choice—though not entirely surprising—was nothing short of a profound disappointment. Despite the fact that one of the major tenets of the multiracial identity movement in the United States is the right of individuals to self identify, for some, Obama—arguably the most powerful political figure in the world—passed up a watershed moment to (1) show solidarity with millions of people around the world of ‘mixed-race’; and (2) use that solidarity to show the nation and the world that the United States was on the path to becoming a post-racial society. For those who truly believed that the president could have moved the nation towards racial conciliation by additionally checking the ‘white’ box on his census form, their disappointment *is* understandable.

But the vast majority of the criticism about President Obama’s census choice has not been about missed opportunities for the nation. Instead, the palpable wailing and gnashing of teeth is from

individuals who believed Obama denied them a means of using the census for self-validation. Thus the point of my complaint is not to take issue with those who criticize Obama's census choice, but to take issue with some of the *reasons* on which those criticisms are based. Critics have accused Obama of denying "half" of his heritage, not telling his "true", "honest" or "accurate" racial story, dishonoring his mother and grandparents and finally, slapping (metaphorically) his deceased mother in the face. It would seem that the only thing Obama has not been accused of—yet—is being a 'mixed-race' traitor. Michelle Hughes, president of the Chicago Biracial Family Network, stated, "I think his choice will have political, social and cultural ramifications." But don't all the President's positions; like those on health care, immigration, and selections of court justices have political, social and cultural ramifications?

If we are wise enough to ignore the wailing, gnashing, denying and the slapping, we can *read* what the Census Bureau says in its "2010 Census Constituent FAQs [Frequently Asked Questions]" which is that: "The racial categories included in the census form generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country, and are not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically or genetically." In other words, race is not biology, race is not anthropology, race is not genetics, race is not math, race is not pure, race is not truth. Race is an evolving convention that is constantly being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed to preserve the hegemony of those holding social and political power in the United States. Our decennial census is a tool that helps us measure our social interactions *on* the ground; not our dead ancestors *in* the ground.

None of this means anything for Cochrane, who really should have titled the film, "*You're Biracial... Not Black Damn It*", for it is those individuals of 'mixed' parentage—people who identify as 'black'—whom she views as a threat to her racial project. She also needlessly extends her film with absurd discussions about the alleged benefits of including biracial people in medical studies—as if they have never been part of them in the first place. At this point she attempts to advance the most preposterous segment of her polemic—so called "mixed-race" medicine. This is a continuation of an interview (in the first film) with Kayci Baldwin, then-president of Teen Project RACE. As is often the case in these performances, Ms. Baldwin gives lip service to the inconvenient truth that 'race' is indeed a social construction, only to dismiss this fact seconds later to promote the notion that somehow the ancestry of self-identified 'mixed race' people is different than for those who are just as 'mixed', but don't identify as biracial. In a feeble attempt to promote what [Rainier Spencer](#) terms "difference without distinction," the film takes the notion of 'mixed-race' confusion to new highs... or lows in this case. Ms. Baldwin illogically proposes that medical researchers should somehow separate self-identified black/white 'mixed-race' individuals from self-identified 'black' patients who... are 'mixed' too. After spending virtually the entire film decrying the application of [hypodescent](#) to themselves, Cochrane and Baldwin go on to, as author Heidi Darrow describes the phenomenon, "one-drop" millions of self-identified African-Americans with heterogeneous ancestry. In short, "race based" medicine is a fallacy and "mixed-race based" medicine is an absolute absurdity. The racial categories, White, Black/African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic, with which we classify people, are coarse and somewhat arbitrary. Since the recorded race of a medical subject is self-declared, it *indicates a social construction that does not necessarily correspond to genetic inheritance*. Why, in the dawn of the 21st century—with computers the size of pinheads, with the ability to communicate with anyone on the globe within seconds, with the ability to map every gene in the human body—do we choose to continue to define ourselves within the framework of *racist* classifications created by long-dead Europeans from the 18th century? Even more importantly, why aren't so-called 'mixed-race' people, who as Rainier Spencer says, "by their

very existence, embody the fallacy of ‘race’” taking a leading role in guiding us to a post-racial future? As Dr. Spencer says so eloquently in his May 29, 2009 article in *The Chronicle Review* titled, “[Mixed Race Chic:](#)”

...The solution to our national racial madness does not lie in altering the racial paradigm so that it is somehow more equal or so that it includes more groups; the solution lies in rejecting both the idea of biological race and the hypodescent that flows from that idea. What popular wisdom tells us is the supposed twilight of how Americans have thought about race is merely a minor tweaking of the same old racial hierarchy that has kept African-Americans at the bottom of our paradigm since its very inception. Multiracial ideology simply represents the latest means of facilitating and upholding that hierarchy—while claiming quite disingenuously to be doing the opposite.

A film that was not shown at this year’s festival, but will hopefully be screened next year, is [Brian Chinhema’s](#) simply titled documentary [Multiracial Identity](#). Chinhema provides an *objective, intelligent, balanced and comprehensive* view of multiracial identity and politics in the United States. The film provides the viewer a window into the actual lives of ‘mixed-race’ individuals and their families along with insightful and elucidating perspectives of four active scholars, a geneticist and a pastor. The film also provides a wise and necessary perspective into the multi-century history of slavery, discrimination and [miscegenation](#) in the United States, and that history’s continuing impact on the social fabric of American life today. *Multiracial Identity* reminds us correctly, that ‘race’ still—after all these centuries—remains a social construction and there are no ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Asian’, or ‘Indian’ genes. The film examines the debate over census categories in the late 1990’s and the continuing debate over the relevance of current racial classifications. Finally, the film courageously asks whether or not the embracing of multiracial identities promotes or hinders the pursuit of a post-racial future.

In an October 2, 2009 article by TeRessa Stoval in *The Defenders Online*, titled “[Identity Wars: I’m Biracial... Not Confused Damn It!](#),” Carolyn Battle Cochrane is quoted as saying..

‘I’m Biracial... Not Black Damn It!’ started as therapy, a small project where I got in touch with myself and a few of my [biracial] girlfriends. It was my personal story, but then I started interviewing people and found that, oh my God, there’s this common story that nobody’s ever talked about publicly,” Cochrane said. “It was this private conversation.” Cochrane penned a memoir, *Private Conversations*, about her experience.

“I had been living my life as a black woman for 30-some years, and I didn’t like how I felt inside,” Cochrane said. Growing up in Queens, N.Y., with a white mother and black father, “I hated the fact that my mother was white, so I didn’t like my mother.” But hearing black people talk about whites “made me sick. I would throw up almost every day of my life, from hearing black people talk about white people,” she said.

“Then I finally decided I didn’t want to participate. I realized my mother loved me and I’d always pushed her away.” Talking with others, she saw the bigger picture. “There is something way more than my story. This is a group of other people who have my same story,” she explained.

One can never underestimate the power of art as a method of therapy for both the creator and the observer. Art—good art—has a way of reaching us in ways that other forms of communication cannot. *I’m Biracial... Not Black Damn It* is neither art nor therapy.

Further along in the article, Stoval reveals (emphasis is mine)...

After decades of research, soul-searching, long, intense discussions, heated debates and a healthy dose of world travel, I came to embrace black/African-American as the designation and the term that enables me to live fully in the diversity of my being, honoring my Jewish mother as well as my African-American/Native-American father, and anyone else whose DNA is manifest in my being.

I shared this perspective with Cochrane, who seemed disappointed at my choice. I mentioned that our President, Barack Obama, and a few celebrities—including actress/director Jasmine Guy; author Walter Mosley; and the late playwright August Wilson—seem comfortable self-identifying as biracial black people.

I explained that I don't feel any sense of conflict or contradiction in being biracial AND black. And I shared that the dozens of biracial people with whom I grew up—including my brother—have chosen to self-identify in many different ways. As a biracial person, that is the real truth I want the world to see: that there is no one correct or superior way in which we should define ourselves or choose to live.

Somehow, I feel more rejected by the fact that Cochrane doesn't seem accepting or affirming of my choice than I ever have by any black or white people for being biracial. While I can empathize and identify with the people in her video trailer, and I support her quest to raise awareness and hopefully get a new box to check, I wonder if the project could benefit from including those of us who represent a different conclusion to the questions of ancestry, allegiance and identity that are an inherent part of being born to people of two different races.

It is here where Cochrane reveals, for lack of a better term, her *true colors*. A woman in conflict with the black community, a woman in conflict with mixed race individuals who identify as black, and perhaps ultimately, a woman in conflict with herself. The right to self-identify—which Cochrane uses as a weapon in her polemic—is the very same right she denies to Stoval. In Cochrane's world view, you can't have 'mixed-race' identity when you have light-skinned people asserting a 'black' (instead of 'mixed-race') identity; an identity that completely undermines individuals with less phenotypically European features asserting their 'mixed-race' identity. It is Cochrane's own internal conflicts that has resulted in a project that was flawed from conception, weak in development, amateurish in execution and not surprisingly, terrible in the final product. She seems clueless about the fact that identity is not necessarily about ancestry and DNA. It is ultimately, about kinship, as [Carina Ray](#) explains in a July 4, 2009 article in the *Zezeqa Post* titled, "[Why Do You Call Yourself Black And African?](#)," where she says:

If blackness in America has been defined broadly enough to claim me as one of its own, that still leaves the question of why I claim my blackness. I could call myself mixed race or even Latina/Hispanic. I certainly recognize that I am multi-racial, but I don't feel a common bond with mixed people simply because we have parents of different racial backgrounds. Equally, I've always been unnerved by the categories Latino and Hispanic to describe people from the Spanish Caribbean and parts of Latin America that are heavily populated by people of African descent precisely because they erase/e-race our ties to Africa. The categories Black and Latino/Hispanic are often defined as mutually exclusive on identification forms in the U.S., such that one is instructed to check "Black" provided they are "not of Hispanic origin" and to check "Hispanic - regardless of race"! Since when has anything in America ever been regardless of race? As history has too often demonstrated this is a calculated attempt to create divisions between black people based on language and country of origin.

At the conclusion of *I'm Biracial... Not Black Damn It-part 2*, I felt sorrow for the freakish portrayal of the subjects in the film. Ignominious kudos should go out to Carolyn Battle Cochrane for resurrecting the “[tragic mulatto](#)” trope and the re-pathologizing of individuals of mixed race. The trauma suffered by many of the subjects in the film had little or nothing to do with race, but with other issues surrounding loss, abandonment, sexual orientation, etc. My sense is that many of her subjects don't need interrogation in front of a camera, they need consultation on a therapist's couch. Hopefully, Ms. Cochrane will leave her director's chair and move to that couch, too.

I am tempted to end this essay at this point, but *my integrity* requires me at the very least, to leave some positive words of advice for future filmmakers wishing to document the issues surrounding multiracialism.

1. Know your subject... Read a book or two and encourage the viewers to do the same.
2. Provide historical context. Remind us how we got to where we are.
3. Don't lead your subjects. Let them tell their own stories in their own way.
4. Include the voices of experts and interrogate them.
5. Try to imagine a world without racial categories and how we could achieve that goal.

Sincerely

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