

A NEW TAKE ON AN OLD IDEA

Do We Need Multiracial Studies?

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KIM M. WILLIAMS, *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006, 208 pages, ISBN: 0-472-11442-5, Cloth, \$27.95.

RAINIER SPENCER, *Challenging Multiracial Identity*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006, 135 pages, ISBN: 1-588-26424-6, Cloth, \$35.00.

HEATHER M. DALMAGE (Ed.), *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004, 253 pages, ISBN: 0-791-46153-X, Cloth, \$65.50, ISBN: 0-791-46154-8, Paper, \$21.95.

Publications about multiracial identity and the multiracial population increased significantly prior to the 2000 U.S. Census. Most of these publications emerged after 1997¹—a significant year in the recent history of studies on the multiracial population, as this was the year the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) established new guidelines for collecting data on race, allowing people to choose more than one race (Office of Management and Budget 1997). It quickly became evident that this change in how the federal government tallies race was a significant event that merited the attention of academics. This surge in research on multiracial identity and the multiracial movement reflected, on the one hand, a push by multiracial advocates for more attention to the complexities of “being multiracial” and, on the other hand, a group of scholars interested in understanding the unfolding of these events.

As much an activist endeavor as an academic one, this series of events was part of a recent quest to understand what being *multiracial* means in modern America, especially with regard to how we categorize persons of mixed descent, and how closely (or not) official categories reflect a person’s self-identity. Prior to the 2000 Census, many scholars on mixed race were already interested in gaining social and political recognition for the “multiracial” population, often allying themselves closely

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with multiracial activists. Books such as Maria Root's *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992) and Paul Spickard's *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (1989) attempted to speak for a growing segment of the population that did not fit into traditional categories of racial classification. Both academic and activist interests were significant to the development of this literature. Maria Root, for example, in addition to being a scholar, also served on the board of the Association of Multiethnic Americans (AMEA), a group influential in the adoption of new guidelines for collecting data on race by the OMB in 1997. Articulating activists' attempts to gain recognition, Paul Spickard suggested that many people were struggling to recognize all their ethnicities in what he predicted would ultimately lead to a more multiracial future. Ultimately, however, a confluence of multiracial politics and a continuing struggle to maintain gains of the civil rights era stirred the waters of a nation concerned to forget its racial past and adamant about moving beyond race, thus making the multiracial future look a little murkier than had been intended.

One of the most perplexing questions about the multiracial movement and studies about multiracial identity is what to do with the expanding definition of race and the new racial categories. It seems that we have truly created a mess, so to speak, in place of what for many years had been a simple, albeit flawed, understanding of race in America. The more finely the categories are partitioned, the less salient race becomes. One response has been to treat this as just another part of the story behind the breakdown of the concept of race in the United States. Proponents of this argument assert that the fluid nature of racial identity, especially for a multiracial population, problematizes our understanding of race, and points to a desire by some—especially the young—to move beyond race (Harris and Sim, 2002), and a practical need to move away from the American obsession with race, perhaps by using ethnicity (Hirschman 2004), perhaps by rendering race altogether obsolete (D'Souza 1995; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that racial ambiguity among biracial children is real (Harris and Sim, 2002; Qian 2004; Xie and Goyette, 1997); however, we need to make sense of what this means for our understanding of race and ethnicity. Few works, to date, have attempted to place the multiracial movement into the broader context of race and ethnic relations. Nevertheless, a growing body of work is beginning to tease out the full implications of the multiracial movement. Kim Williams, Rainier Spencer, and Heather Dalmage are three authors whose work is concerned with the new questions regarding multiracialism.

Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America, by Kim Williams (2006), treats issues characteristic of scholars interested in the set of events leading up to and following the adoption of the “mark one or more” (MOOM) option for the 2000 Census. *Challenging Multiracial Identity*, by Rainier Spencer (2006), represents a growing interest in critically understanding and evaluating the motivations of “multiracial” politics. And *The Politics of Multiracialism: Challenging Racial Thinking* (2004), edited by Heather Dalmage (2004), is a collection of essays by authors who contribute to what might be seen as the emerging field of multiracial studies. I shall discuss these authors' attempts to reflect on, and potentially give birth to, a subdiscipline of multiracial studies, after first offering a synopsis of each work.

Williams's *Mark One or More* introduces us to the movers and shakers behind the origins of the modern multiracial movement. In this remarkably detailed account of the events leading up to the 2000 Census, Williams reveals the politically contested terrain of data on race collected by the U.S. government. *Mark One or More* unveils the motivations behind, and the political interests embodied in, a movement that has fundamentally altered the way we categorize the U.S. population by race, highlight-

ing just how complicated the events surrounding these changes were. At the same time, Williams identifies the variety of group interests involved, and why some wholeheartedly supported a movement to change the way data on race is collected, while others were vehemently opposed. We are left with a cogent story about the emergence of what has come to be called the “Mark One or More” (MOOM) option.

Williams describes the savvy lobbying abilities of a small group of individuals whose actions resemble a social movement as much as they do a successful marketing campaign. Her story begins by describing the four groups who emerged prior to the 2000 Census, groups whose members interacted in unique and self-interested ways that ultimately culminated in success, the most important of which were the multiracial activists themselves. Despite the conflict of interests that sometimes arose among multiracial activists, they all agreed on one thing: the U.S. racial classification system as it existed was not adequate for multiracial individuals. As they struggled throughout the 1990s to change racial classifications, they came head-to-head with a variety of groups.

A veritable chess match of competing interests ensued. Civil rights groups such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) came to view the MOOM option as a serious threat to their ability to monitor civil rights violations, though some groups, including MALDEF vacillated in their support. The primary concerns were that MOOM would complicate the collection of race data and dilute minority numbers, as persons previously identified as monoracial would migrate into a new, multiracial category. Meanwhile, politicians, both conservative and progressive, had their own interests and constituencies in mind (as always). Some capitalized on the opportunity to appear sympathetic and “in touch” with racial diversity, by supporting what they viewed as a more progressive understanding of race; others saw the multiracial position as one that could weaken the bite of civil rights legislation and gain credence among conservative constituents interested in moving beyond discussions about race. Each of these groups—activists, civil rights groups, and politicians—triangulated their attacks in such a way as to influence the OMB to respond in ways that served the group’s own interests.

This incongruent set of alliances, as Williams describes them, captures much of what *Mark One or More* has to add to our knowledge about racial politics and the multiracial movement. We see how different political groups managed to co-opt what once was a relatively small movement of mostly White middle-class suburban women married to Black men, whose children were biracial. Williams reveals the consequences and dangers of a movement comprising different groups whose goals intersect in divergent ways. Civil rights organizations quickly responded to what appeared to be an assault on civil rights monitoring, while conservatives capitalized on the opportunity to push an agenda of color blindness, and these antagonistic forces together led to the success of the MOOM option. Williams uncovers the uncertainty of a movement whose ideas were as readily adopted by Ward Connerly and Newt Gingrich as they were by progressive multiracial advocates attempting to achieve recognition and political representation.

On one front, Williams shows, multiracial activists asserted their position at the federal level and managed to impress such influential figures as Newt Gingrich and Thomas Petri, both of whom had poor records when it came to civil rights legislation. Williams tells the story of how one multiracial activist, upon handing Gingrich a report on the multiracial movement, was met with this response: “This is the right thing to do for the children” (p. 55). (One cannot help but ponder the speaker’s intent.) On another front, a disconnected yet somewhat successful mobilization at

the state level managed to insert multiracial language into state race-collection practices one state at a time. The state-level movement typically targeted schools, and at times was supported by only a small number of multiracial activists—a point Williams repeatedly impresses on the reader. In the first case of multiracial legislation in Ohio that Williams describes, only “one activist, Chris Ashe—a White woman, the parent of a multiracial child, and the cofounder of Project RACE—petitioned the state legislature to make the change” (p. 70). Nevertheless, Williams argues, well-intentioned White Democrats and progressive young Black politicians were the primary signatories of legislation at the state level. This was obviously a very different group from that which supported the conservative-led, federal-level movement.

Ultimately, Williams’s book helps us to understand just how the multiracial movement fits into a broader civil rights agenda, and also the problems that arose in implementing MOOM. She suggests that, in the end, multiracial activists may not find themselves in conflict with civil rights ideas, so much as in a state of confusion when it comes to their relationship with the broader civil rights struggle. Most activists, Williams says, are opposed to the “color-blind” political agendas of people like Ward Connerly and Newt Gingrich. An even younger group of multiracial activists seems to be committed to ensuring a political movement supportive of “multiracial” persons, in addition to promoting the goals and visions of the civil rights movement. It is this more recent set of organizations, often located on college campuses, that we should pay some attention to, if we want to understand the ongoing impact of this movement. As Ronald Sundstrom suggests, “a proper mixed race consciousness, born from responsible mixed race politics, challenges widespread and false conceptions of race held uncritically by the public” (Sundstrom 2001, p. 307). I would add that it must also be fully inclusive of those who do not identify with being multiracial, especially those who are most marginalized. The civil rights movement was most successful when it fully incorporated the voices of all groups—the multiracial movement should be, too. The bigger challenge, of course, may lie in determining what a “responsible mixed race politics” should look like. That is one thing that Williams and others writing on multiracial identity and the multiracial movement have yet to address adequately—a point to which I will return below.

One attempt to tackle the issue of what a “responsible mixed race politics” might look like is found in Rainier Spencer’s *Challenging Multiracial Identity* (2006). Spencer argues that academics writing from a position of advocacy on the part of multiracial identities represent the most significant problem with scholarly work in the field of multiracial studies to date. He suggests that this is apparent in three ways: 1) biased research generated by what he calls “proidentity” scholars; 2) attempts to resurrect weak arguments of earlier activism surrounding multiracial identity; and 3) the construction of a misguided belief that there is a growth in the population of “first-generation” multiracial persons in America. He claims that all of this has been, ironically, at the expense of what he suggests has always been the most racially mixed group in the United States: the African American population.

Spencer’s “challenge” is not so much about what multiracial identity represents as it is a global criticism of those producing weak scholarly work. His biggest concern is that the emerging field of multiracial studies has not attained the rigorous standard of scholarly work exhibited by other academic disciplines. Indeed, *Challenging Multiracial Identity*, Spencer says, “is a completely unapologetic polemic against the notion of U.S. Black/White multiracial identity, particularly what is known as first-generation identity, and against published work to date that supports it” (p. 4). He reminds us throughout the book of this point, for it is a point too easily forgotten. His unequivocal attack on four recent pieces written about multiracial identity estab-

lishes, for Spencer, the tenuous and wrong-headed direction of much of what exists in the area of multiracial studies. In the end, he suggests that we take a more metatheoretical approach to multiracial studies, and move away from the “proidentity,” activist agenda of many publications to date. Ultimately, however, Spencer offers little concrete advice regarding a fruitful direction to take.

Unlike Williams, who incorporates theoretical perspectives from existing literature on race and social movement, Spencer relies primarily on rules of rhetoric and logic to assess the relative importance of different motives and strategies of academics and activists interested in studying and promoting multiracialness. One of his strongest assaults on the multiracial movement and *proidentity* scholars, a term used quite frequently throughout the book, is that they are engaging in what he terms *psychobabble* and *socioblather*. Stated simply, these terms are intended to refer to the reliance by “proidentity” scholars and activists on appeals to beliefs about the importance of race and a “healthy” racial identity for proper social and psychological development. In many ways, they resurrect the classic “tragic mulatto” myth characteristic of earlier accounts of the multiracial population (Fredrickson 1987). But, more importantly, by doing so, Spencer argues, they reify a biological understanding of race, so that two distinct races are bound up in a “multiracial” body whose only happiness can be realized by fully acknowledging the person’s true racial selves.

The unwitting belief that multiracial identity is bound up in the combination of two distinct racial identities—founded upon a biological understanding of race—highlights, for Spencer, one of the most damning claims against “proidentity” scholars, viz., that many of the arguments put forth by multiracial activists are part and parcel of the persistent belief in a biological foundation of race. Accordingly, Spencer argues, “Either we believe in biological race or we do not, and if we do not we should act accordingly. Sadly, but hardly surprisingly, this is not the case among either activists or proidentity academics” (p. 77). At times, Spencer makes it very clear who these promoters of biological race are. G. Reginald Daniel, for example, is accused of “escorting biological race into the house through the backdoor of social race” (p. 91). Sociologists and psychologists alike might be particularly surprised to learn that they are one of the “greatest purveyors of the fallacy” of biological race (p. 86). Indeed, one need not even be aware of these “backdoors,” which let biological notions of race persist despite attempts to move beyond them.

Spencer argues that the entire post-*Loving v. Virginia* “biracial baby boom” is a myth about what is more likely the outcome of other trends, *not* the legalization of interracial marriages in the sixteen states (mostly southern), that had still not legalized interracial marriages by 1967. The large increase in intermarriage rates between 1970 and 2000, Spencer argues, has led many to mistakenly suppose that we are in the midst of a historically, unprecedented “biracial baby boom.” This myth, Spencer suggests, is one of the intended consequences of a concerted effort by some to construct a story about a growing multiracial population, not unlike the actions of multiracial activists prior to the 2000 Census. Spencer claims, as have others, that this is simply not true. In fact, Spencer says, the true “biracial baby boom” began in the Chesapeake region in colonial America over 200 years ago, in the form of consensual relations between Black slave (and indentured servant) males and White females (p. 71). According to Spencer, this is why the Black population is one of the most genetically diverse in America today. Were it not for the “one-drop” rule, and if expressing a multiracial identity were more socially acceptable, the size of the multiracial population would easily be much larger than it is today, and we would not even be having these conversations about a “biracial baby boom.”

Spencer suggests that biased research, a resurrection of weak arguments surrounding multiracial identities, and the creation of an illusion of a “biracial baby boom” and rapidly growing multiracial population have had some bad consequences. Some of his major concerns are that this trend has strengthened the belief in biological race by playing into fallacies about the meaning of *multiracial*, in addition to failing to incorporate the status of *Whiteness* and the boundaries between *Whiteness* and *Blackness*. As Williams points out, the proponents of a multiracial identity movement were typically White mothers concerned about acknowledging their own racial identities through their child in a society that all too often relied on the one-drop rule for racial assignment. Similarly, the outcome of the multiracial movement has been the creation of a “privileged and exclusionary identity separate from other Afro-Americans” (p. 91), which privileges Whiteness and denigrates the Black identity. In concluding his book, Spencer finds us to be at a crossroads in our study of the multiracial population. We can continue to fall into the same traps that these other “proidentity” authors have fallen into, or we can move toward a more metatheoretical understanding of what multiracial identity means—a point we should all consider.

Nevertheless, developing a coherent metatheoretical approach is a more daunting project than most are prepared to tackle. *The Politics of Multiracialism*, edited by Heather M. Dalmage, pulls together the work of a group of scholars theorizing about multiracial identity and the multiracial movement. Dalmage’s edited volume is not as metatheoretical as Spencer would like, but it might nonetheless be closer to what he proposes would be a productive direction in which to take multiracial studies. These articles represent the gamut of research presently being conducted in this growing subdiscipline of the social sciences. Just as multiracial organizations are attempting to define the boundaries of multiracialness, Dalmage and others are making their own attempts to define the boundaries of multiracial studies. She has produced a well-organized collection of such articles, each deserving of our attention. However, since a nice summary of each article is provided within the introductory chapter, I will restrict myself to highlighting some of what this wide-ranging volume has to offer.

Dalmage begins by outlining “the context of the multiracial movement.” Two chapters in this section are particularly strong: Kimberly DaCosta’s “All in the Family: The Familial Roots of Racial Division” and Kim Williams’s “Linking the Civil Rights and Multiracial Movements.” DaCosta deftly situates the family as a locus of racial identity formation and a significant site for social control that has helped maintain racial and ethnic boundaries over the years. Her discussion of the “racialization of the family” and the “familization of race” reveals just how intimate and far-reaching the racial state is. Contributors Abby Ferber and Charles Gallagher enrich our understanding of the family, White supremacy, and the extent to which Whites are willing to accept an expansion of Whiteness to include Asians and Latinos. Finally, near the end of this section, Williams unveils how a “multiracial movement” arose from the civil rights struggle for recognition. Many of the themes found in Dalmage’s edited collection are woven throughout this chapter, which focuses mainly on the connection between the social movement of the civil rights era and the modern multiracial movement.

Dalmage returns to many of the issues raised by Rainier Spencer in *Challenging Multiracial Identity* in the next section of her collection, which features contributions by Spencer himself, along with Kerry Ann Rockquemore, Erica Chito Childs, and Terri A. Karis. Together, these authors remind us of the many contradictions found within the multiracial movement, especially when it comes to how we think about race as a construct. Once again, we find Spencer making an early argument for what

is more fully articulated in his recent book: that multiracial activists should be fighting to end racial categorization, not to “cement the idea of race”—as multiracial categorization would do—while at the same time continuing civil rights compliance monitoring. Indeed, he suggests, “Far from dealing with anything of this magnitude, multiracial advocacy is concerned with self-esteem and with federal validation of personal identity choices” (p. 118). Just as important, suggests Rockquemore, is the problem that arises from having a simplistic understanding of multiracial identity. She outlines several models for understanding multiracial identity, including *singular identity*, in which one identifies primarily with one race; *border identity*, in which one identifies as biracial; *protean identity*, in which one moves between different racial identities depending on the context; and *transcendent identity*, in which one is able to transcend, or move beyond, racial categories. Rockquemore argues that, much to their discredit, the multiracial movement has typically assumed that mixed race persons fall under the *border identity* category. This oversimplification of multiracial identity leads to the exclusion of multiracial persons who do not identify themselves in this manner, as Childs reveals through her study of two multiracial websites. It also tends to downplay the complexity of race, as Karis suggests with her study of White mothers of multiracial children.

The final section of this book, “Lessons from the Multiracial Movement,” includes several gems. These include discussions that broaden our understanding of the historical and social context in which multiracial persons live; the unique scenario of transracial adoptions; the impact on White privilege; and the necessity of incorporating a full commitment to social justice into a multiracial ideology. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O’Rian identifies the unique location of Japanese Americans as both honorary Whites and foreigners—a point made more explicitly in Mia Tuan’s book *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?* (1998). Consequently, they hold a special location within the White community, while at the same time feeling the pull of a proud, at times exclusive, Japanese ethnic community. As a result, the presence of multiracial Japanese Americans within the Japanese American community is quite strong. Barbara Katz Rothman’s essay on transracial adoption may be somewhat out of place in this section, in that it does not directly deal with what most would include under the rubric of *multiracial* studies, but it does highlight the complexities associated with living in a “multiracial family.” The interaction of race and familial ties has a significant impact on the way groups contemplate the world around them, and this Rothman also explores in her essay about her own experiences raising a child of African descent as a White mother. More importantly, however, as both King-O’Rian and Rothman explain, it leads to the ascendancy of a color-blind agenda in discourses surrounding multiracial relationships and activism. Both Heather Dalmage and Eileen T. Walsh point to the problems associated with pushing an agenda of color blindness at the expense of fully understanding the interlocking set of gender, race, and class inequalities that persist despite efforts to eradicate them. Whether it is through advocating for color-blind adoptions, or the desire to find a place of “comfort” as a White mother in a multiracial context, we must not forget that a full commitment to social justice needs to incorporate the voices of everyone, as these authors emphasize.

The books by Williams and Spencer and the collection edited by Dalmage all attempt to develop a better understanding of multiracial identity and multiracial politics through an academic lens. Williams explores the origins of a political movement that ushered in a significant amount of attention to multiracialness by linking the multiracial movement to the broader civil rights struggles. In doing so, she uncovers a strange set of bedfellows and growing tension between multiracial activists and civil rights organizations. Spencer questions the underlying logics of a

multiracial movement and a body of work whose guiding assumptions are grounded in a racialized understanding of human variation. For Spencer, the biggest problem is how to recognize the complexity of racial and ethnic identities without falling back on the dangerous notion of biological race. He warns of the problems associated with a multiracial movement that has done little to incorporate the voices of Black Americans—indeed, has actually marginalized them. Finally, the broadly focused survey of literature collected by Dalmage contextualizes the full complexity of understanding what at its heart is a transient and vague concept: *race*. This is especially true of the population of Americans who claim to be *multiracial*.

We are left, in the end, with one vexing question: where do we go from here? Williams does an exemplary job of reminding us where we are, and where we have come from. As she convincingly explains, politicians, organizations, and social movement groups allied themselves in strange and conflicting ways. This highlights an important prescription: that future work on multiracial studies should be developed more fully. More importantly, how can the multiracial movement operate in the context of color-blind politics and persistent racial inequality? As each of the authors has suggested, this is one of the most dangerous issues confronting a multiracial movement. If the multiracial movement becomes co-opted by the likes of Ward Connerly and Newt Gingrich again, it stands the chance of losing any semblance of a progressive racial discourse, and being discredited in the eyes of civil rights organization interested in redressing historic (and current) racial inequalities. In such a form, the multiracial movement could potentially strengthen the momentum of a color-blind political agenda that has already undone some of the hard-fought gains of the civil rights era (Klinkner and Smith, 1999). Arguments about the growing complexity of racial identification and the need to dismantle our system for collecting data on race only add to the confusion surrounding race and racial identity (Harris and Sim, 2002; Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2001; Root 1992).

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which this may or may not be happening. As Williams herself suggests, many of the newer, younger, multiracial organizations are very adamant about maintaining a supportive stance of civil rights enforcement and monitoring. Consequently, it is unlikely that these movements will reproduce the rhetoric of earlier generations of multiracial activists. Whether or not they are as easily co-opted will of course depend heavily on the ways in which they articulate their own demands. To some degree, this was seen among the rank and file of the larger multiracial organizations heavily criticized for their ties to conservative politicians and color-blind advocates as the 2000 Census drew near. The members of these organizations often had a less conservative take on the role of race in politics, with the consequence that the future of multiracial activism is uncertain as it relates to other race-interest-based organizations such as the NAACP, MALDEF, and broader political agendas centered on racial politics. As of yet, there does not seem to be a significant politically based movement attempting to influence governmental decisions, and some have even suggested they may have disappeared altogether from the political scene (Farley 2002), though I am skeptical of this claim. It remains to be seen what will happen. The 2010 Census approaches.

In short, as Spencer observes, the field of multiracial studies needs direction, but what sort of direction? Spencer suggests that it would be best to construct studies and arguments about multiracialness in order to dismantle the fallacy of race. Or should we instead spend our time explaining to people that racial diversity is nothing new, that it has always been there, along with the African American population? Many publications have attempted to untangle our understanding of race by exploring the inconsistent ways in which racial and ethnic identities manifest themselves in

the multiracial population. But these have done little to move us forward in our understanding of race, and in many ways such works have obfuscated rather than elucidated the concept of race, in particular, our understanding of the color line (Lee and Bean, 2004).

Spencer offers some interesting critiques of the misdirected claims made by those who promote a growing multiracial population. At one point, Spencer argues persuasively that the “biracial boom,” which many purport to be the consequence of shifting legal definitions of the marriage institution in America, may have more to do with changes in immigration flows and already occurring trends in the weakening of animosity between different groups. No doubt, an increased flow of Asian and Hispanic immigrants is a large part of the story behind increased rates of intermarriage and the growth of the multiracial population. However, to call this “news” requires that one ignore a significant portion of publications treating this phenomenon (Lee and Bean, 2004; Qian 2005). We already know that much of the increase in the number of children from interracial marriages is likely a direct consequence of increased rates of immigration and intermarriage across racial boundaries for these groups (Lee and Edmonston, 2005). But Spencer neglects to acknowledge some of the more important works on multiracial studies found in Dalmage, even while citing others from this same collection. For example, DaCosta argues that, prior to *Loving v. Virginia*, “antimiscegenation laws acted like a companion bookend to incest laws, shaping marriage patterns in accordance with racial domination and shaping the familized way in which race is understood” (p. 31). These constraints on the family have only recently been lifted. Spencer attempts to discredit the idea that *Loving v. Virginia* was a primary cause of the “myth of the biracial baby boom,” but its role should not be dismissed so easily. It is likely that, at the very least, *Loving v. Virginia* sent a signal to the U.S. population that, in the eyes of the state, interracial marriage was no longer the “sin” that it used to be—even if it still remained a sin in the minds of some.

Despite their virtues, none of these studies addresses what all of this means for our understanding of race and racial identities beyond “multiracial identity.” How do we “rethink” race, or better understand it, in the light of this multiracial research? Williams gestures in one direction, though she does not directly address this question. In showing the political contestation and the interaction of individual and state-level interests associated with the emergence of a new racial classificatory system, Williams manages to capture to some degree the racial formation process in action (Omi and Winant, 1994), although she does not give herself as much credit for doing so as she should. Spencer comes closest to providing a framework for generalizing beyond the multiracial population. However, his solution is somewhat disappointing in that he seems to suggest that we move beyond race. For him, the continued discussion of the “social reality” of race among social scientists remains so close to notions of biological race that we should cease discussing it altogether: “Anthropologists and geneticists have long since moved beyond the 1950s on the subject of biological race; imagine if sociologists and psychologists joined them!” (p. 51). Again, while there are certainly some sociologists and psychologists whose understanding of race appears frighteningly similar to that of biological race, I think that most who take seriously the idea of race as a social construction would vehemently reject such insinuations. But, then again, maybe I am one of those who still believe—perhaps in error—that race still matters if and only if people think that it matters.

In summing up the lessons gained from these books, I think we need to pay special attention to the grouping of this diverse collection of writings under the

banner of “multiracial studies.” I find it somewhat difficult to choose the correct words to describe the overarching subject of these studies, and the various claims made in these books. Are these authors writing ultimately about multiracial identity, about a social movement, or about the way we understand race? There seems to be a shared desire, often implicit, to institute a “multiracial studies” subdiscipline within the varying fields of the social sciences, and, in that sense, the books reviewed here are major contributions to what we might call “multiracial studies.” My fear, however, is that the growth of a subfield of multiracial studies may fall short of its own expectations. Recall that not long ago a growing subdiscipline within the social sciences, “Whiteness studies,” hit the scene. Are multiracial studies, like Whiteness studies, attempts to portion out a piece of the pie, failing at times to realize that they are still a part of a larger body of work centered on race? Might they try so hard to create their own identity that they end by distancing themselves from other works on race and race relations in unproductive ways? Focusing on a particular group, even a loosely structured one such as the multiracial population, can be instructive, but let us not distance ourselves too far from the broader set of institutions, social relations, and histories that have played a part in constructing race and racial identities for all groups. One salient idea pervades these works: it is not an either-or scenario; we are all in this mess together. If we want to quit talking in circles, a better connection between “multiracial studies” and studies about race in general needs to be developed.

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NOTE

1. I conducted a title search using *multiracial* or *biracial*, and a subject/keyword search using *racial identity* in the WorldCat database for book and thesis publications between 1970 and 2006. After excluding irrelevant books, I found a total of seventy-five books and theses, though undoubtedly there were more. Over 80% of these books were published after 1997.

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