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Revising Race:

How Biracial Students are Changing and Challenging Student Services

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between biracial college students and race-oriented student services (e.g., Office of Black Student Services). These services are organized around conventional understandings of race that assume there are five, discrete racial categories, namely, Black/African American, Latino/a, White, Asian American, and Native American. Drawing on interviews (n = 60) with students and administrators at two universities, this article examines the problems that arise when students' racial identities are incongruent with universities' views of race. This study can assist practitioners in the development of services on campuses that are characterized by increasingly fluid racial terrains in the post-Civil Rights era.

Is Obama Black Enough? Ever since Barack Obama first ascended the national stage at the 2004 Democratic convention, pundits have been tripping over themselves to point out the difference between him and the average Joe from the South Side. Obama is biracial, and has a direct connection with Africa. He is articulate, young and handsome. He does not feel the need to yell 'Reparations now!' into any available microphone. The Illinois Senator is a different kind of African-American candidate. But this is a double-edged sword. As much as his biracial identity has helped Obama build a sizable following in middle America, it's also opened a gap for others to question his authenticity as a black man.

[\(Coates, 2007, para. 1-2\)](#)

As the young, dynamic president of the United States, Barack Obama's biracial background has become a source of appeal, fascination, and debate. As the son of a White American mother and Black Kenyan father, Obama represents the idealism of the melting pot ([Ripley, 2004](#)). However, Obama cannot simply claim to be biracial or White. His Blackness is unavoidable, courtesy of the one drop rule,* which identifies a person with any Black ancestry as Black. And Obama does embrace his Blackness—as a young attorney he made a point to serve poor African Americans on the south side of Chicago. Yet the nature and implications of his identity came into question throughout the Democratic primary. At its onset, Obama faced skepticism from some Blacks, who questioned his Blackness and commitment to openly addressing issues of race. Yet his initial refusal to "disown" Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who made statements indicting the United States for its history of White supremacy and declaring that the federal government was responsible for the spread of AIDS in the Black community, alarmed some Whites ([Zeleny & Nagourney, 2008](#)). Obama's relationship with Rev. Wright stoked fears about the prospect of a radical Black president who **[End Page 115]** engages in "reverse racism." These fears were only compounded by the ensuing controversy over Obama's relationship with Bill Ayers, the 1960s Weather Underground anti-war activist. The political right, dominated by Whites, used this relationship to paint Obama as a leftist and communist who somehow was not fully "American" ([Ingraham, 2008](#); [Suddath, 2008](#)). Yet ultimately, because of his biraciality, his generally moderate, inclusive, and idealistic ideologies, and refusal to engage in explicitly racialized politics similar to the likes of Al Sharpton, Obama was able to remain palatable to liberal Whites, who were integral to his victory ([Ripley, 2004](#)). Moreover, the previously tepid response from the Black community transformed into enthusiasm, as it embraced Obama as the first Black president, who simply happened to come from a multiracial background ([Patterson, 2007](#)).

Research Focus

Given the changing racial demographics and ideologies of the post–Civil Rights era, this study examines the experiences of biracial students at two universities, utilizing racial formations theory and the concept of double consciousness, created by the preeminent W.E.B. Du Bois, often considered the first Black sociologist. Biracial students are traditionally defined as those whose biological parents fall into two different monoracial categories. This research is concerned with the ways that student services, particularly those that have a racial orientation (e.g., Black Student Services), understand and respond to biracial students, as well as students' views and level of participation in these student services.

Biracial college students, in particular, are reflective of a larger youthful multiracial population challenging the American racial pentagon and monoracialism, which contend that every individual falls into one of five racial categories, namely, African American/Black, Asian Pacific American, Latino/a, White, or Native American ([Winters & DeBose, 2003](#); [Yetman, 1998](#)). As a group, biracial and multiracial people tend to be disproportionately young and concentrated on the West coast, particularly in California and Hawaii ([Jones, 2005](#)). According to data from the 2000 Census, "7.3 million or 2.6 percent" of respondents "reported more than one race" ([Jones, 2005, p. 1](#)). Illustrating its youthful orientation, 15.5% of the "two or more races" population is between 10 and 17, compared with 11.5% of the general population, and 26.3% of the two or more races population is between the ages of 18 and 34 versus 23.7% for the total population. The median age for the population is 23.4 ([Jones, 2005](#)).

Perhaps the most significant example of college students' leadership in the proliferation of multiracial identity and discourses, as well as distribution of resources to multiracial people, is the work of Matt Kelley. While a student at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Kelley began *Mavin*, a magazine that explores the mixed race experience ([Davila, 2005](#)). *Mavin* has since grown into a full-fledged, nonprofit organization, with programs and publications ranging from the Matchmaker Bone Marrow Program, to the Multiracial Child Resource Handbook ([Iwasaki, 2004](#); [Smith, 2005](#)). Today, mixed race student organizations have cropped up on hundreds of college campuses ([Williams-León, 2003](#)).

Given the importance of college students to the development and growth of a multiracial population, how universities as social institutions respond to these students and shape their experiences, is significant. In particular, race-oriented student services (ROSS) are fruitful sources of data for several reasons. First, ROSS were created in the 1960s and 1970s to support and give a voice to **[End Page 116]** students of color. Consequently, because these services were not designed to address changing racial demographics and identities, they may now face difficult challenges when confronted with students who identify biracially ([Williams, 2006](#)). Second, these services exist as the universities' responses to cultural nationalists' demands for recognition and inclusion, and in turn, they represent the legitimization and institutionalization of African American/Black, Native American, Asian Pacific American, and Latino/a identities. A growing biracial student population can potentially challenge these firmly rooted identities and the student services built upon them. Third, ROSS have often occupied a symbolic and literal position of marginality vis-à-vis the

larger institution, receiving fewer resources than other student services. Hence, it is particularly salient to investigate the dynamic between these services and biracial students, who also experience racial marginality.

This investigation provides insight into localized issues of race specific to higher education, as well as issues of race beyond the ivory towers. First, this study brings to light (a) students' efforts to construct meaningful biracial identities within institutions of higher education that reify monoracialism and (b) universities' negotiation of the complex terrain of race and ability to respond to the needs of rapidly changing student bodies. Second, data from this study can assist in answering larger questions about race in an era of racial fluidity. What does it mean to be Black . . . or to be White, Latino/a, or Asian American, for that matter? Can one form an authentic biracial or multiracial identity? How do politics circumscribe one's racial identity? Are we on the cusp of a historic period that will entail the demise of race and racism? As the number of Americans identifying as mixed race grows, the answers to such questions will be debated. Yet, as Obama's story indicates, the growth of the mixed race population and corollary racial fluidity should not be mistaken for colorblindness, because race remains a primary lens through which Americans perceive one another and a tool for social organization, resource distribution, and political representation ([Omi & Winant, 1994](#)).

Literature Review

To understand the significance of the relationship between biracial students and ROSS, it is necessary to first review the historical context of this relationship. The following discussion examines the existing literature focusing on mixed race issues, as well as that which discusses the salience of race within higher education.

Multiracial Identity: A Civil Right or Smokescreen for Colorblindness?

The growing number of students who identify as biracial is a reflection of larger demographic and political changes. In the years leading up to the 2000 Census, a heated debate took place over the prospect of adding a "multiracial" category to census forms. The addition was proposed by a coalition of mixed race identity organizations, including Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) and the Association of Multiethnic Americans ([DaCosta, 2007](#); [Williams, 2006](#)). The multiracial category was opposed by numerous civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, who feared that the multiracial option would result in "racial flight," whereby people who previously identified with one of the minority categories would now arbitrarily mark the multiracial category without realizing the consequences ([Espiritu & Omi, 2000](#)). In turn, measuring [End Page 117] the needs of minority communities, as well as protecting their civil rights, would become increasingly difficult. Civil rights organizations' opposition was inflamed by the political right's, including Newt Gingrich's, support for a multiracial category, which was perceived as a quest to propagate "colorblindness" in public policy. That is, the right's investment in the category was interpreted as a strategy to begin a de-racialization process, ultimately leading to the complete elimination of race as a component of policy ([Williams, 2006](#)). Eventually, a compromise was approved whereby respondents could mark more than one box for racial

identification on the census, with their options consisting of White, Black/African American, American Indian and Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and Some other race ([Grieco & Cassidy, 2001](#); [Jones & Smith, 2001](#)).

The passionate debate over changing census categories was fundamentally about the meaning and social construction of racial identity, the way that racial classifications should be determined, and the role of each in the creation of public policy and institutional practices. These debates are reflected in the expanding research on mixed race identity that has questioned the legitimacy of monoracialism, as well as race in itself ([Williams, 2006](#)). Yet the long-term consequences and larger sociological implications of mixed race identity remain disputed, creating theoretical and ideological divisions within the literature.

The traditionally dominant theoretical strain in the literature argues that multiracial identity progressively challenges monoracialism, because it creates racial fluidity, correctly identifies people, and discourages racism ([Root, 2003](#); [Zack, 1993](#)). Theorists of this strain have framed biraciality as an individual issue, exemplified by an emphasis on the "right" of a person to identify and be recognized as biracial, as well as a strong psychological focus on biracial children's self-esteem ([Dalmadge, 2000](#); [Root, 1996](#)). Consequently, this view of identity tends to neglect the larger political and social significance of racial identity.

In contrast, a recently emerging theoretical strain problematizes biracial identity for its simultaneous rejection and reliance on biological theories of race, tenuous claims regarding the destruction of racism, and dangerous quibbling over "who is white(r) and who is not white" ([Spencer, 1997](#); [Spencer, 2006](#); [Spickard, 2003](#); [Teixeira, 2003, p. 33](#)). First, despite claims that multiraciality debunks the constraints of racist, biological understandings of race, it is argued that multiraciality may inherently reify such understandings. For example, calls for the validation of an individual who identifies as "half Black and half White" assume that "Black" and "White" are discrete, biological characteristics ([Nakashima, 1996](#)). Second, researchers have pointed to South Africa and Brazil as evidence that mixed race identity does little to dislodge White supremacy and only creates finer racial strata ([Spencer, 1997](#); [Spencer, 2006](#); [Spickard, 2003](#)). Third, this strain of the literature views assertions of mixed race identity as attempts to "Whiten" oneself and distance oneself from minority status, hence procuring more social privileges. Adherents to this viewpoint perceive the multiracial movement's relationship with the political right and usage of colorblind ideology as indications that the movement lacks commitment to anti-racist causes.

Biracial Identity and Student Development

Although the research on multiraciality often focuses on young people, literature on college students' identity development has only recently begun to examine mixed race identities. Traditional approaches to the study of college students' identities exhibit two key **[End Page 118]** weaknesses. First, theories have historically relied heavily on psychologically oriented developmental scales, resulting in excessive emphasis on linearity and determinism. That is, they tend to imply that identity constructions have a beginning and an end, which is marked by the formation of an "ideal" or "healthy" identity. Erikson ([1968](#)), one of the most commonly cited identity development theorists, describes identity as "the ability to experience one's self as something that has continuity and sameness, and to act

accordingly" (p. 42). Marcia (1966), another notable theorist, posits that there is a "final" stage of identity—"identity achieved"—that entails commitment to an identity after crisis. These theories are inadequate for understanding biracial students' identities, which are often not ones of continuity and sameness, but of conflict, fluidity, and hybridity lived in a monoracial world (Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Second, identity development theories have historically neglected the impact of race and racial politics on identity. Even racial identity development theories and scales such as the White Racial Identity Attitude Scale, Black Racial Identity Scale, and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, have tended to assume discreteness and homogeneity of racial groups and identities, failing to consider the experiences of biracial and multiracial students (Helms & Carter, 1990; Helms & Parham, 1996; Phinney, 1992).

Moving toward remedying these weaknesses, research has increasingly acknowledged and investigated college students' occupation of multiple identities and the ways that students make meaning of their multiplicity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Examinations of mixed race identity have emerged, contending that multiracial individuals may take a variety of identity paths, including occupying multiple racial identities simultaneously, engaging in situational identities, adopting a monoracial identity, asserting a multiracial identity, and rejecting racial identity all together (Renn, 2000, 2003; Root, 1996). Such conceptualizations of identity more accurately reflect the current complexities of racial identity, yet they still do not fully account for the ways in which these individual identity paths are circumscribed and formed in light of larger racial histories and politics.

The University Campus: A Site for Production and Contestation of Racial Identities

Students' development of their racial identities, whether biracial or monoracial, can be greatly impacted by institutions of higher education, which are intimately involved in the production, contestation, and negotiation of racial identities. Concomitantly, they have assumed a prominent role as racial battlefields, not only during the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, but in the post-Civil Rights era, as political dissension proliferates over affirmative action, ethnic studies, and race/ethnic/cultural programming and services (Anderson, 2005; Kellough, 2006).

Neo-conservatives condemn racialized policies and programming as segregationist forces that perpetuate racism. Writers such as Arthur Schlesinger (1991) have argued that these policies and programming lead to a "cult of ethnicity" that "drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races. . . . The end game is self pity and self ghettoization . . . institutionalized separatism only crystallizes racial differences and magnifies racial tensions" (pp. 102–104). In essence, neo-conservatives argue that racial differences are an illusion, the United States is a color-blind meritocracy, and minorities should integrate themselves into US society rather than "self segregating" and adopting "hyphenated" identities (D'Souza, 1996). These arguments have increasingly influenced public policy, with successes such [End Page 119] as the passage of Proposition 209 in California, which dismantled affirmative action and other race-based programs in public institutions, and the Supreme Court's ruling in *Gratz v. Bollinger* (2003), which found that University of Michigan placed too much weight on race in the admissions process (Gurin et al., 2004).

In contrast with the claims of neo-conservatives, there is a wealth of evidence that indicates that race-oriented policies and programming increase the degree to which minority students build social support networks, participate in campus activities, engage in politics, interact with students of other races, and form positive racial identities (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; [Rhoads, 1998](#)). These benefits can greatly improve minority students' experiences, which are often characterized by poor academic preparation, social isolation, and lower retention and graduation rates ([Swail, Redd, and Perna, 2003](#)).

Student Services

Given higher education's historic and contemporary role in shaping racial debates and policy, a great deal of literature has focused on the ways that student services can more effectively address issues of race among students and facilitate the development of healthy racial identities ([Banning, Ahuna, & Hughes, 2000](#); [Baxter Magolda, 2003](#); [Cobham & Parker, 2007](#); [Liang & Sedlacek, 2003](#); [Patton, McEwen, Rendon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007](#)). Although this research is certainly important, it has neglected the experiences of biracial and multiracial students in relation to student services. Furthermore, very little research has focused on ROSS offices that were outgrowths of the cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s and designed to focus on racial issues ([Patton, 2006](#)). Typically, these student services may either be race specific, such as "Office for Black Student Services," or "race general," such as "Multicultural Center." Today, ROSS offer an array of services to mostly minority students, including tutoring, cultural programming, and mentorship ([Patton, 2006](#); [Rodriguez, 1997](#)).

Limited research has examined these student services and generally focuses on the benefits of ROSS, as well as opposition to ROSS. Patton's (2006) research on Black cultural centers found that they can serve as an important "safe space" for students and providers of "historical and personal identity" (p. 640). Others have argued that ROSS are divisive and damage White–minority relations. In a piece on race relations at Northwestern, Stern and Gaiter (1994) noted that, "For many white students, a walk past the 'Black House,' a converted private home housing the university's African-American Student Affairs office and a place where black students congregate to study and relax, heightens their sense of separateness" (p. A1). Rodriguez's (1997) work also illuminated similar sentiments about ROSS at the University of New Mexico. As Rodriguez noted (1997, p. 14):

Richard Bertholz (The New Mexico Association of Scholars) . . . stated that at a public university, there is no place for El Centro de la Raza, or the American Indian and the African American Student Services centers at the university. Those centers, he maintains, discriminate against white students.

These types of ideological debates have not ceased, and ROSS remain contested, marginalized, and vulnerable student affairs entities, particularly given mass cutbacks in higher education ([Scott & Bischoff, 2000](#)). Their vulnerability may have dire consequences for ROSS' ability to service students of color, as well as adapt to changes in the student body, including the growth in students who identify as mixed race. **[End Page 120]**

Theoretical Framework

In this study, racial formations theory and the concept of Du Boisian double consciousness are used to analyze the relationship between biracial college students and ROSS. Racial

formations allows for a broader, macro-level analysis of the relationship's societal and institutional significance, whereas double consciousness provides a micro-level lens with which to understand the lived experiences of biracial students. This dual theoretical approach addresses the weaknesses of much of identity development literature, which tends to conceive of identity formation as a linear and individualistic phenomenon. Instead, I conceptualize the formation of students' biracial identities as a fluid, contradictory, and complex lived experience with no clear developmental beginning or end that not only shapes the student, but also the institution. These processes are circumscribed by the historical specter of race, as well as ideological and material conflicts characterizing contemporary racial politics.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant ([1994](#)) define racial formations theory as "the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed. . . . A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to redistribute resources" (p. 56). Following this definition, the Black Power, Chicano, and Asian American movements can be considered racial projects that engaged in racial formations, because they helped to create Black, Chicano/a, and Asian American identities, emphasized racial pride and autonomy, and connected the oppression of people of color within the United States to non-Whites' struggle for liberation and decolonization abroad. On the college campus, these movements' efforts to "redistribute resources" included pushing administrations to create ROSS to address the unique needs of minority students. In turn, institutions of higher education became involved in the politicized racial formations process of legitimizing and reifying monoracial, non-White identities.

In the post-Civil Rights era, biracial students can be considered participators in racial formations as they seek to "create" and "inhabit" biracial identity. As evidenced by multiracial organizations' activism regarding census categories, many mixed race people are seeking validation not only from family and friends, but from the state and other social institutions. This quest includes calls for resources, such as health programs that can address multiracial people's difficulty finding bone marrow donors. Yet multiracial activism has not gained traction anywhere near that of the Black, Chicano/a, and Asian American movements. This may be the result of intragroup diversity (How much does a Black/White person really have in common with an Asian American/White person?) and the absence of overt and legalized racism.

The intragroup diversity and absence of clear "enemy" are compounded by complex personal identity struggles. W.E.B. Du Bois' ([1903/1999](#)) concept of double consciousness is useful for understanding biracial identity and linking macro sociohistorical racial formations with micro-level identity struggles. Reflecting on the Black experience, Du Bois wrote,

the Negro is a sort of seventh son . . . gifted with second sight in this American world . . . which yields him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world . . . this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and self pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a [End Page 121] Negro; two souls; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Du Bois contends that the constant pressure of moving between two divergent consciousnesses—that of the Negro and of an American who is not recognized as such by the empowered White majority—negatively impacts the psyche of individual Blacks and also the social standing of the Black community as a whole ([Harris, 1997](#); [Holt, 1990](#)).

Du Bois's construction of double consciousness was rooted in his deeply personal experiences of racial oppression. Throughout his own life, Du Bois was compelled and forced to navigate numerous social, economic, and political worlds. Du Bois was born to Alfred Du Bois and Mary Burghardt Du Bois in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, and his familial lineage included both Black and White family members. Although Du Bois was not subject to the extremes of racism during his childhood, his later journey into the South to attend Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, introduced him to the ravages of Southern racism. Going on to attend Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin and Harvard University, Du Bois often felt alienated within high culture and White institutions, which offered only tacit acceptance ([Du Bois, 1903/1999](#)).

One might ask whether it is appropriate to apply the concept of double consciousness to the contemporary experience of biracial people, given that Du Bois was describing the experience of Blacks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Despite the many obstacles they may face, mixed race people today in no way face the racial oppression that Blacks faced during Du Bois' time, and they may come to view their identities as positive experiences of racial merging, sharing and reconciliation ([Anzaldua, 1999](#); [Root, 1996](#)). Thus, the application of double consciousness in this research departs from Du Bois' original usage of the term, and I note that duality may yield positive self-conceptualizations. Yet while acknowledging these realities, the basic, original conceptual tenets of double consciousness can still be applied. The experiences of mixed race people may incur duality, as they often entail the crossing of troublesome color lines and navigation of numerous racial worlds with varying levels of acceptance.

Methodology

This research was carried out at two well-regarded universities in California, one private and one public. Throughout this article, I refer to these institutions as Western University (WU) and Bay University (BU), respectively. This study utilizes qualitative methods to examine students' experiences and identity formation processes, as well as institutional responses. Methods used to collect data included (1) in-depth, semistructured interviews, (2) focus groups, (3) archival collection, and (4) observation. Utilizing various qualitative techniques enabled me to delve into the multiple meanings of social processes, as well as how people interpret and create meaning out of their experiences within these processes ([Denzin & Lincoln, 1998](#); [Marcus & Fisher, 1999](#)). Data were collected from 2005 to 2007. At each university, in-depth interviews ($N = 60$) were conducted with both student services staff/administrators and students, and at least two group interviews with five to ten students were conducted. Interviews were instrumental for this study because they illuminate and "stress the socially constructed nature of reality," which is produced in the racialized lives of students and the institution of the university ([Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 8](#)). I chose to include group interviews because they possess significant **[End Page 122]** advantages; they

are "inexpensive, data rich, flexible, stimulating to respondents, recall aiding, and cumulative and elaborative, over and above individual responses" ([Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 55](#)).

Research participants were recruited via the snowball method. A personal acquaintance who worked in one of BU's ROSS offices served as my initial contact, who then introduced me to other ROSS administrators and staff. These administrators and staff introduced me to students, who in turn, introduced me to other students. Flyers were also distributed on both campuses to recruit more student participants. The student sample included biracially and monoracially identified students, as well as participants and non-participants in ROSS. The racial identities of participants were determined through self-identification. That is, students identified themselves. I used this method of identification to preserve the student participants' agency and gain an understanding of how they viewed themselves, regardless of how I perceived them.

Interview questions covered a wide range of topics. In interviews with ROSS administrators and staff, questions were asked regarding the establishment and history of each office, substantive changes in organization and programming over time, ideology and philosophy, current programming and services, and the student population served. In interviews with students, questions were asked regarding their racial identity, family background, experiences with issues of race before arriving on campus, experiences with issues of race on campus, perceptions of ROSS, and level of participation in ROSS.

The collection of archival documents and informal observation served as supplementary methods of data collection. Archival research involved collection of information on ROSS, such as brochures that describe program philosophies and program activities. When possible, I collected internal documents from the offices, including program evaluations and historical documentation of student activities. Archival data has the potential to be rich "because the information may differ from and may not be available in spoken form, and because texts endure and thus give historical insight" ([Hodder, 1998, p. 111](#)). Consequently, as with informal observation, archival collection provided me with salient supplemental and contextual data, which allowed me to better depict the institutional environment in which student services and students themselves are acting. More specifically, it gave me a sense of how conditions on campus have changed both materially and ideologically with respect to race. Informal, organic observation was conducted throughout my study, including observation of the physical environment of offices and interactions between students and staff members. Observation provided another means to enhance my data collection, for it is "fundamentally naturalistic in essence" and allowed me to observe, unbound by "categories of measurement or response," events and interactions infused with meaning by participants ([Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 81](#)). Data attained from informal observation yielded contextual information to paint a fuller, more accurate picture of the campus sites and student populations.

Data coding and analysis was inductive in nature, reflecting grounded theory. That is, codes were not created before data collection; codes were established after data was collected and preliminarily reviewed sentence by sentence ([Strauss & Corbin, 1990](#)). I chose such an approach because I believe it allows for more focused and rich codes that more accurately

reflect the substance and nuances of data, particularly interview data. In turn, interviewees' voices are better "heard" as data analysis proceeds and themes are generated. **[End Page 123]**

Trustworthiness and credibility of collected and analyzed data was established in a variety of ways. First, the diverse data collection methods used, often referred to as "triangulation," as well as the moderate length of the study, ensured the attainment of multidimensional data ([Marshall & Rossman, 1995](#)). More specifically, individual interviews, group interviews, observation, and archival information yielded data from a variety of perspectives that could be woven together to understand and paint an intricate, and ultimately more accurate, picture of students' experiences and institutional responses to these experiences. Second, on a consistent basis I reviewed raw data and my data analysis with three well-respected academics in the fields of education, sociology, and political science. Doing so resulted in more sound data, given that researchers from three different disciplines were critically evaluating my data collection methods, data, and data analysis. As Marshall and Rossman ([1995, p. 145](#)) state, "a person who plays 'devil's advocate' and critically questions the researcher's analyses" can help to control biases and increase credibility and trustworthiness. Third, I utilized reflexivity, examining my own position as a researcher who is "part and parcel of the setting, context, and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent" to neutralize biases ([Altheide & Johnson, 1998, p. 285](#)). The maintenance of field notes, as well as the consultations described, facilitated reflexivity.

WU and BU were chosen for this study because both universities retain student service units that are either explicitly or implicitly race oriented and were originally created to serve the needs of students of color. WU retains three separate race-oriented student service units—African American/Black Student Services (AABSS), Chicano/a Student Services (CSS), and the Center for Asian Pacific American Student Services (CAPASS), all created in the late 1970s and early 1980s. AABSS was the first of the three race-oriented student service units created at WU, followed by CSS and CAPASS. The three offices provide a diverse range of services, including mentorship, leadership training, professionalization, access to community services, and cultural programming. As a private institution, WU has been able to escape the constraints and consequences of Prop 209, leaving ROSS relatively untouched, in contrast with BU's ROSS.

BU houses the Center for Academic Achievement (CAA), a "multiracial program" that targets "disadvantaged" students. CAA's predecessor, the Community Education Project (CEP), was established in the 1960s and consisted of race-specific components with specialized programming for Black, Chicano/a, Indian, and Asian American students. Despite opposition from CEP's administrators and students, BU's vice chancellor spearheaded the dismantling of the program in the early 1970s. CAA replaced CEP and eliminated the race-specific components and cultural programming. Today, CAA is even more "de-racialized" as a result of Prop 209, which prohibits using race as a basis for programming. This de-racialization is illustrated by CAA's primary focus on academic development and retention for socioeconomically disadvantaged students.

Both universities are relatively large, with populations exceeding 17,000. Their racial demographics are also similar. According to fall 2006 undergraduate enrollment statistics, White and Asian American students collectively comprise 60% to 70% of the student

populations at WU and BU, whereas Latino/a, Black, and Native American students constitute 12% to 16%, 4% to 6%, and 1% to 2% of the population, respectively. The remaining are international students. Neither school collects data on the mixed race students [End Page 124] enrolled. However, given the universities' size and location on the West coast, it was not difficult to find a population of biracial students from which to sample.

Limitations of this research are primarily related to two key factors. First, the relatively small sample size of research participants inhibits enhanced generalizability. However, constructing generalizations is not the intent of this study; rather, it is to illuminate the subtleties and complexities of how racial formations are lived by students and enacted by and within the institution. Second, my focus on California universities creates geographically driven limitations. A disproportionate number of mixed race persons claim residency on the West coast—primarily California and Washington ([Winters & DeBose, 2003](#)). Thus, issues of biracial and multiracial identity are probably more salient for individuals and institutions on the West coast. However, limitations in time and funding prevented the expansion of my study to other geographic locations; I contend that, although my study is confined to California, it can still provide substantive insight into the processes of racial formations that may also be emerging in other areas of the country.

Research Findings and Discussion

Biracial Students: Experiences of Marginalization and Double Consciousness

Interviews with students and administrators indicated that ROSS at both universities retain the capacity to foster a sense of double consciousness in biracial students as a result of their engagement in racial formations that reify monoracialism, yet this is not always the case. Moreover, biracial students' feelings of duality are not necessarily an indictment of ROSS, but a reflection of larger racial histories, politics, and projects that limit ROSS' capability to respond to students who do not identify with conventional racial categories.

Biracial Student Participation in ROS at WU

The majority of biracial students interviewed had experienced some degree of familial racial conflict during their childhoods, ranging from grandparents' disapproval of their adult children's interracial relationships to estrangement from prejudiced family members. Given biracial students' conflict-ridden familial experiences, it is important to ask, How do such experiences shape students' college lives? In the following discussion, I move to examine the ways in which ROSS at each university shape and react to biracial students who arrive on campus with personal histories of racial conflict. I first turn my attention to WU and argue that because WU's ROSS are left-liberal racial projects that institutionalize and legitimate the identities of "Black," "Latino/a," and "Asian American," they also implicitly deny the existence and veracity of biracial identity and persons. Hence, many biracial students view ROSS with discomfort, because they seemingly inhibit students' ability to develop "true self consciousness" and secure institutional validation ([Du Bois, 1903-1999, pp. 10–11](#)). Yet I also contend that ROSS do not intentionally exclude biracial students and are constrained by the ideology and limited resources yielded by their historical racial projects.

A majority of the biracial students who had experienced racialized conflict and discrimination in their childhoods did not participate in any ROSS on WU's campus. Courtney, a student of Black and White parentage, stated,

I haven't really participated in any of the AABSS events. . . . I guess it's because I [End Page 125] feel like I won't be understood . . . and with all the racial conflict that I went through as a kid, I just avoid things on campus which are overtly about race.

Courtney's comments highlight the difficulties of reconciling a biracial experience with ROSS, which are based on monoracial identities. That is, because Courtney identifies as Black and White, it is difficult for her to see how her needs would be met by an office named "African American/Black Student Services." A childhood rife with racial conflict further distances Courtney from AABSS, because AABSS does not address interracial conflict within families.

ROSS do not address interracial conflict within families because they assume students come from monoracial families. ROSS are designed to address particular Black, Asian Pacific American, and Latino/a needs and concerns in concert with the original historical goals of cultural nationalist racial projects, which emphasized communal empowerment. For example, at WU, providing support for immigrant parents is viewed as a "Latino" need. Addressing changing racial categories and identities is not within ROSS' tradition. Thus, biracial students' feelings of duality are not ROSS' "fault," because ROSS are simply fulfilling their historical missions to meet the needs of minority students.

The use of monoracial labels in the naming of ROSS and the association of these offices with racial politics were acknowledged by administrators and students as potentially negatively affecting student participation. As Nicolas, a high-ranking administrator of CSS, stated, "I know that some students, especially those with white heritage, might hear the term 'Chicano' and feel like this office is not for them since it is such a highly political term." Biracial students often echoed Nicolas' thoughts; they associated the use of conventional racial labels with being forced to choose between their identities. Sean, a student of Filipino and Mexican ancestry stated,

I just never felt completely comfortable with either one of those offices [referring to CAPASS and CSS]. The names . . . in themselves are indications that they are not going to address my identity. . . . I'm both, but the offices treat the races as pretty much separate.

The mere names of ROSS can induce double consciousness, because they legitimize particular racial identities and place students in a position where they must navigate a racial terrain that is ambivalent toward biraciality. Yet ROSS, such as CSS, have strong historical and ideological investments in names that are representative of the racial pride and justice pursued by previous generations.

The discomfort that biracial students feel when they simply hear the names of the ROSS offices is enhanced when they tangibly experience racial segregation and exclusion during participation in ROSS activities. Students expressed great displeasure with what they perceived to be exclusionary programming. Leah, a student of Chinese and Black ancestry stated, "If I go to a 'Black' event, people always look at me, like 'what is she doing here? Does she think she's Black?" Reflecting on her college experience, Carmela, who is Black and Panamanian, stated,

I had done the Latino/a Overnight, and it was a horrible experience. People were looking at me like what are you doing here? And so after that I knew this office [CSS] was here but I just didn't feel it was for me. I didn't want to participate.

As a result of her negative experience with the Latino/a Overnight, a program for incoming Latino/a freshmen, and pressure from Black students to ally herself with Black organizations, Carmela seriously contemplated transferring [**End Page 126**] her freshman year: "I was . . . frustrated with this experience of being told that I did not belong, as well as being told who I should be." Carmela's story is troubling for she was marginalized by student services that were designed to lessen racial disenfranchisement, albeit among traditionally recognized minority groups.

Despite feelings of duality, none of the biracial students expressed hostile attitudes toward ROSS and there were a small number who were ROSS participants. Instead, students conveyed more muted expressions of hurt and resentment for not fitting into the existing racial paradigm. As Jackie, a student of Korean and White ancestry, indicated, "I have no problem with those programs. I think students can get a lot out of them—culturally and personally." Such comments indicate that biracial students do not see ROSS as purposeless or want ROSS to be eliminated; rather, they wish ROSS had or would create a "place" for them.

Biracial students' alienation from WU's ROSS are related to the left-liberal multiculturalism and monoracialism propagated by these offices. Left-liberal multiculturalism is a racial project rooted in theories of cultural nationalism, as well as collective activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Black Power movement. This form of multiculturalism emphasizes racial strength and autonomy, distinguishing itself from the "melting pot" approach. It also tends to demand adherence to a non-White identity, whether Black, Asian American, or Chicano/a, in the name of racial pride and social responsibility ([Bennett, 2001](#); [Cross, 1971](#)). Yet, in contemporary times, such a demand ignores the reality that biracial students often wish to embrace multiple racial identities and may have had negative experiences with minorities, including those with whom they share ancestry. Thus, the nature of ROSS' historical origins and commitments to students of color, and biracial students' nuanced and complex racial experiences, almost inevitably breeds a disconnect between the two.

Biracial Student Participation in the CAA at BU

Although internal conflict within families and exposure to campus racial segregation seemed to steer biracial WU students away from ROSS, its impact on BU students' participation in the CAA was more varied. Some students avoided participation in CAA and expressed feelings of duality, whereas others were enthusiastic participants. Nolan, for instance, very much enjoyed CAA programming:

It's really great. We get counseling, tutoring, and like early registration through CAA. It kind of is about race, I mean part of its original basis was to help minority students, but that's not necessarily obvious on a daily basis. It's more about helping us to succeed.

Dina, a student of Black and White parentage, also stated that she appreciated the "academic support" CAA provided and "liked meeting other students in tutoring sessions." Several biracial students participated in and enjoyed CAA despite its racial undertones. Its focus on

academics and to a limited degree, its colorblind nature, seemed to attract some biracial students.

In contrast, other biracial students did not participate in CAA either because they were uncomfortable with the underlying, unspoken, racial nature of the program, or because they were of higher socioeconomic status did not qualify for the programming. James, a student of Korean and White heritage, stated, "I'm not sure if I would participate, just because it seems minority centered, and I'm not always comfortable in those kinds of [End Page 127] environments." Expressing similar feelings, Andrea, of Mexican and White parentage, asserted, "The program seems like a good idea, and I coulda done it, but since I got here, I have avoided organizations . . . that are about race." The differences between biracial students' reactions to and level of participation in race-based programming at WU and BU may be rooted in the racial formations and projects deployed by the programs. At WU, ROSS are organized around three distinct racial minority identities—African American/Black, Chicano/a, and Asian Pacific American—and carry out services to meet the purportedly unique needs of each population. In turn, many biracial students feel that they will not have a "place" within these student services, although they desire one. For some biracial BU students, CAA, which is an officially colorblind, yet unofficially "raced" program, seems more welcoming. CAA is not explicitly organized around monoracial identities, and biracial students, such as Nolan, feel comfortable at CAA. Yet there are also other students who are still wary of CAA, which prevents their participation in potentially beneficial programs.

An examination of the interaction between the CAA and biracial students exemplifies the difficulties an institution may face when attempting to institute a racial project of colorblindness in a race conscious world. Despite legislation that has left BU and CAA without the language and tools to explicitly address issues of race, students perceive CAA as a racial program, suggesting that aspirations to colorblindness are a fantasy. Whether they embrace or are cautious about CAA's racial nature, BU's biracial students are not colorblind, and instead are openly grappling with issues of race. Yet CAA is unable to address both biracial and monoracial students' racial concerns and needs with programming, given the current legal constraints.

ROSS: Shifting Paradigms of Racial Identity

Given biracial students' perceptions and responses to ROSS at the two universities, the following discussion analyzes the ways that ROSS administrators view mixed race issues, and how, and if, they are responding to the presence of biracial students on campus.

WU: Institutional Responses to Biracial Students

All directors of ROSS at WU perceived an emergent biracial identity as relevant to their work with students in the post-Civil Rights era, and certainly did not want biracial students to have a sense of double consciousness in relation to their programming. However, the recognition of biracial identity's increasing significance did not translate into substantive changes in the offices' philosophies, programs, or services, and ROSS remained intimately tied to their historical racial projects. This was especially true for African American/Black Student Services. Maya, a key administrator in AABSS, acknowledged she "sees more and more biracial students coming in every year." Yet she applied the one drop rule to these

students: "As far as I'm concerned, if you have a drop of Black in you, you're Black. If you look Black, you're Black because society is going to pin you into that." Reflecting left-liberal multiculturalism's emphasis on power dynamics, Maya clearly believes that racism is a pervasive force in the United States and that, in turn, the way that society perceives and treats multiracial persons of African American descent is more important than how these same persons personally identify themselves. Hence, she saw no need to create any services to specifically address the needs and concerns of biracial students.

Similarly, Jason, a high-ranking administrator in the CAPASS, doubted the veracity **[End Page 128]** of biracial identity: "Is there really a biracial identity? . . . I'm not sure. A person may identify with both sides but as far as there being a separate biracial identity, I think it's unclear whether there is one." Jason concluded that he was not sure whether there was truly a need for services to focus on biracial students because he did not believe there was a cohesive community and had not heard any direct requests for such services. Jason's comments speak to the importance of the relationship between racial formations, community, and resource allocation. That is, when a new racial identity is created, the appearance of a strong community demanding political power is central to securing resources from social institutions.

Nicholas of CSS was the only administrator who translated his concern about the rising numbers of biracial students into programming. When asked about ROSS' future, Nicholas stated, "if someone asked me what the major issue is going to be in the next 10 to 15 years in student services, I think it's going to be multiracial students." Given his concerns, Nicholas has attempted to organize a couple of events that tap into the biracial experience, yet these events have received a tepid response:

when we did the program on the connections between Blacks and Latinos, it was new to them [students]. There is a feeling of not wanting to deal with it or acknowledge it. And that shows with the students who are Black and Latino . . . who have felt like this wasn't their niche, and that [African American/Black Student Services] wasn't their niche.

Nicholas' willingness to address "nontraditional" racial identities, such as biracial identity, seems to be rooted in his professional background. Nicholas is the youngest of the three directors and has worked at two other universities, including one that is a hotbed of activism. As a result, Nicholas is quite attuned to the nuances of race in post-Civil Rights society.

In contrast with the administrators of ROSS, numerous biracial students felt that mixed race issues should be addressed with programming. Rhia, a CAPASS student participant of Japanese and Irish heritage, stated, "I . . . want to see something for biracial and multiracial kids. . . . There are needs." Unlike administrators, biracial students also frequently voiced the belief that they share a common identity, experience, and kinship with one another. Shawn, a student of Black and White ancestry, stated, "when I first came here I became really good friends with this girl who is also Black and White . . . it was just really a bonding point." Moreover, ideas about biracial community expanded beyond commonality between biracial people of the same ancestry. Tanya, a CAPASS participant of Indian and Irish ancestry, mused,

For me, racial identity . . . is about someone who understands what it's like growing up being of two different cultures. I think being African American and Japanese is the same as being White and Japanese. You understand what it's like as an individual and then relating with other people. They understand the experience.

These students perceived their biracial double consciousness as both a positive and negative experience that was shared with others. As a consequence, they clearly felt that they were part of newer racial formations entailing the creation of a mixed race community with its own strengths and needs.

The discrepancy between how administrators, particularly the AABSS and CAPASS administrators, perceive biracial students' needs and collective identity and how students perceive themselves is likely result of generational and ideological differences. The administrators' ideologies are rooted in the cultural nationalist racial projects of the late 1960s and early 1970s that allow little room for [End Page 129] the fluidity of race. In contrast with students, they are much more aware of the historic struggle of people of color and savvy when it comes to identity politics. Much like the Civil Rights activists who opposed the addition of a multiracial category to the US Census, they are wary of impulsively changing programming for a student population whom they know little about, as this may decrease the resources available to Black, Latino/a, and Asian Pacific American students. In contrast, students are part of a new generation that is more flexible in regard to issues of race. They have grown up on liberal multicultural education, which entails the belief that all people's experiences should be acknowledged. Hence, students have called upon WU to recognize and distribute resources to biracial students. Yet because many students remain woefully ignorant of the history of race and institutional racism, they can at times be naïve about the implications of their calls for validation and resources.

The CAA and Biracial Students: The Absence of Recognition

Although ROSS at WU are tepidly recognizing the salience of biracial identity and experiences, even mere recognition is lacking from the CAA counselors at BU. During interviews, not one CAA counselor discussed the experiences of multiracial students. When commenting on students' racial issues, the significance of race on campus, and the role of race in ROSS were discussed, they were primarily framed in cultural and monoracial terms.

Counselors' discourse and ideologies of race revolved around monoracialism in two key ways. First, counselors relied on monoracial categories to describe their students. When asked, "What is the racial make-up of CAA?" counselors used the categories of Latino/a, Black, Asian American, and Native American to describe the student population. With such simple statements, nontraditional groups, whether Arab Americans or biracial people, are made invisible, albeit not with intention or malice. Second, CAA counselors used monoracial "talk" to make sense of their students' experiences. For example, counselors asserted,

- • For Latinos, language is a big part of identity.
- • Many Asian students face a lot of pressure from home to be a doctor, engineer, whatever, and this is a stress they have to deal with.
- • The decrease in the number of African American students is really significant . . . those African American students who are here . . . may feel socially isolated.

These statements clearly suggest that Latino/as, Asians, and Blacks are legitimized, "real" racial groups with distinct characteristics and experiences. Furthermore, these comments exclude any possibility that students may have biracial or multiracial experiences.

CAA's ongoing adherence to monoracialism can be attributed to the effects of Proposition 209, and the resulting insidiousness of colorblindness, which can be considered a racial project. Although colorblind proponents believe that colorblindness-in-action will eliminate the salience of race, it simply does not; colorblindness cannot retroactively render the historical and present-day effects of race and racism null and void. Instead, colorblindness actually inhibits institutions such as BU from progressively dealing with issues of race. Counselors may be unaware of changes in their students' racial identities or racialized experiences because no longer is race spoken of in an open manner. Hence, counselors continue to use monoracial language to assess students' racial lives, instead of engaging with alternative ideas of race because the institutional environment does not allow for it. Furthermore, contributing to its deracialization, [End Page 130] CAA focuses most on academic development, not identity development or cultural and social justice education.

Biracial students at BU expressed ambivalence regarding this lack of recognition, in contrast with those at WU, who expressed some desire, albeit limited, for validation from ROSS. This ambivalence seemed to be rooted in students' own uncertainty about their own identities. In response to the lack of institutional recognition of biracial identity by CAA, Nora, a student of White and Filipino heritage stated,

I think it's fine what they [CAA] do. They have their approach, and I think it's mostly to help minority students and that's cool. I don't think they should necessarily do anything special for biracial students, or Hapa students. . . . What would they do anyway?

Similarly, Rose, a student of Mexican and White heritage, asserted, "I don't think the school has to do anything in particular for multiracial students. It's cool if they have events, like where people discuss interracial relationships . . . or mixed race people, but if they don't, I don't think that's bad." Nora and Rose's comments reflect uncertainty about the parameters of biracial identity, and the institution's responsibility to respond to students who assert biracial identities.

Biracial students' ambivalence is linked to their own identity struggles and the colorblind racial project functioning at the university. More specifically, biracial students at BU have not been able to observe BU addressing race openly. Thus, there is nothing to compel them to think that issues affecting mixed race people can and should be dealt with by institutional entities such as CAA. In turn, biracial students end up engaging with issues of race in the same manner as the institution, with apathy, ambiguity, and the perception that race is an individual issue.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

Institutions of higher education contribute to the development of students' racial identities. However, there is at times a disconnect between universities' understandings of race and those of students. In particular, universities often seem to be unable to keep up with changing racial formations among the student body, including, but not limited to, students who identify as biracial. This is even the case for ROSS that are often most responsible for confronting and dealing with issues of race among students on a daily basis. Given the findings of this research, I make a series of practical recommendations for how universities and ROSS can adapt to and serve the needs of changing student bodies. These recommendations are

idealistic, yet I believe they can help universities and ROSS to form higher standards and begin preparations to meet these standards.

First, ROSS need to conduct their own, self-reflective "autopsies" as a basis for engaging in more progressive programming that addresses the needs of a diverse student population. One of the fundamental elements of such an autopsy is the recognition of and dismantling of problematic assumptions about students' experiences with race. For instance, as reflected in the findings of this study, ROSS tend to simply assume that their students come from monoracial backgrounds, which in fact may or may not be true. This assumption undergirds programming and can result in the alienation of biracial students who very well may have experienced racial conflict within their family, regardless of whether they identify biracially or monoracially. Consequently, ROSS administrators must discard the belief that their students are from monoracial families and take active steps to understand their students' familial experiences. A variety of [End Page 131] programming can facilitate this understanding, such as organizing recreational family days and weekends that give administrators the opportunity to meet students' families.

Many of the assumptions made about students' racial experiences are the result of a lack of information about students. One effective way to remedy this problem is to survey potential and current ROSS student participants about issues such as familial, residential, and educational experiences with race. This information can inform programming to increase its efficacy.

Second, ROSS must consider altering the manner in which they represent and "market" themselves. Images and words can make strong impressions on students and shape their view of ROSS, as noted by Nicholas' comments about the usage of the term "Chicano" in the naming of his office. Hence, ROSS should evaluate their self-portrayals, including their names, publications, and Web sites. Adjustments can be made in small, simple increments; for example, photographs on Web sites can be changed to showcase students who are diverse in terms of racialized characteristics such as skin color. If biracial students are able to see themselves visually represented in such a manner, it may help them to feel more comfortable with taking part in ROSS programming.

Third, given the allocation of greater funds, ROSS should create more dynamic, progressive programming so that they do not become relics of the 1960s and 1970s. ROSS, whether they operate under colorblind or explicit racial projects, tend to rely on monoracialism. Yet, as illustrated by this study's findings, it is clear that students are engaging more complex understandings of race in their lived experiences and discourse. One key way that ROSS can more effectively reach out to biracial students is by role modeling racial inclusiveness for their students. Administrators from ROSS focused on Blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/as can meet regularly to organize and implement joint programming. Joint programming need not always be ideologically complex—beginning with a joint social event, for instance, can become an important step in role modeling inclusiveness. The important message conveyed by such programming—that although ROSS may be rooted in monoracial understandings of race, they are not limited by monoracialism—will help ROSS to more effectively reach out to biracial students.

The practical suggestions enumerated are not meant to encourage ROSS to abandon their traditional focus on the needs of Black, Latino/a, Native American, and Asian American students. Instead, these suggestions advocate for more inclusive programming, so that ROSS can remain relevant in the post–Civil Rights, post–affirmative action era. Achieving such a balance of recognizing and responding to the very real needs of monoracial students of color, as well as biracial students, is certainly no easy task, yet it will only increasingly become necessary as the mixed race student population grows.

Conclusion

The findings of this study help to reveal the new racial formations of the early twenty-first century. However, this "newness," should not be mistaken for the irrelevancy of race—race is changing, not disappearing. Hence, we need to create different ways of thinking about race. It is encouraging that many of the young college students interviewed were grappling with and engaging with progressive, if conflicted, racial discourses and politics. In many ways, these students model the creation of new racial spaces of merging and reconciliation. If we wish to contest the continuing insidiousness of colorblindness and institutional racism and foster a post–Civil Rights society of racial liberation, it would behoove us to listen to their voices. **[End Page 132]**

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Footnotes

*The one drop rule became deeply embedded in Americans' understanding of race with the demise of slavery after the Civil War. During this time, it became increasingly important to maintain the divide between Whites and Blacks, given that Whites could no longer rely on the caste system of slavery (Davis, 2001; Payson, 1996). Whites were well aware of the existence of mulattoes, some so light skinned that they could pass as White. Thus, over time, the mulatto, quadroon (a person with one quarter Black ancestry), and octoroon (a person with one eighth Black ancestry) categories disintegrated and anyone with Black ancestry was typically considered Black—the one drop rule (Hickman, 1997).

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