In the world of newspapers, “beneath the fold” apparently means that the feature bears only secondary interest or importance compared to what is situated above it, but in all fairness to the writer of the article that I am alluding to, all news for the last three weeks has taken a back seat – or should I say, assumed a beneath-the-fold-posture? – to events unfolding in Egypt. In a very real sense, though, post-millennium changes in American racial attitudes – the topic of the article – are in fact revolutionary-seeming and may go far to explain both the 2008 national elections and their midterm mate of 2010. Both elections “addressed” race in a more or less explicit manner and dispatched glaringly opposite messages concerning it. We might put it this way: It was as though 2010 were furious with 2008 and wrought its revenge in an election result that all but cancelled out the previous outcome. It seems that the Facebook crowd – the young and the restless – stayed home that day, and it is precisely that generational cohort toward which Susan Saulny’s New York Times piece, “Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Choose All of the Above,” is aimed and from which it draws its inspiration. For this cohort, race is no longer just “race,” but becomes a playful smorgasbord of this, that, and the other. My head spins and my eyesight grows cock-eyed, trying to figure this one out. In short, I fall down in the dizziness.

We’ve been here before, and that is the disappointment. Reminded in the course of Saulny’s treatment that terms like “mulatto,” “once tinged with shame…is enjoying a comeback in some young circles” (1), one wonders what all the brouhaha about “post-racial” identity actually means, unless the new racialist reflexes are intended to be taken as parodic gestures, but I’m not at all sure that that is the case. Ms. Saulny’s article, designated as a single

entry in a series that “will explore the growing number of mixed-race Americans” (20), is based on the author’s probe of the issues, conducted among some fifty students who are members of the Multiracial and Biracial Student Association at the University of Maryland in College Park. Though membership in the MBSA is said to be open, the rationale for the group’s existence is predicated on the number of racial mixtures that converge on a single personality and the descriptive apparatuses that differentiate skin tone and hair type: “tan skin” and “curly brown hair,” for instance, signal, in one case, that the person’s ancestry “could have spanned the globe” (1). Americans are in the midst of a demographic shift, we know, that is fuelled by immigration and intermarriage, as “one in seven new marriages is between spouses of different races or ethnicities” (1). As a result, today’s undergraduate population comprises the “largest group of mixed-race people ever to come of age in the United States” (1). Needing, then, names for racial categories that do not fit the traditional census classifications, the “new” subjects of race welcome “the multiracial option…after years of complaints and lobbying, mostly by white mothers of biracial children who objected to their children being allowed to check only one race.”

What amounts to demographic data and genetic input is here transliterated into terms of human and ontological value, and that is precisely the rebarbative boomerang of the old race concept, or “the racialized perception of identity,” as Robin Blackburn describes it. Rainier Spencer’s view, cited in the article, that “‘mixed race identity is not a transcendence of race, it’s a new tribe,’” penetrates to the heart of the matter, which I would conceptualize as the mimesis of a social and political problem that misnames its vocation. And what, exactly, is the problem?

We very much doubt that the fury here is that there are not enough boxes on the census form, or a deficit of classificatory items, or the prohibition to check more than one, or even the thwarted desire to express racial pride, but, rather, the dictates of a muted self-interest that wishes to carve its own material and political successes out of another’s hide. To that degree, these celebratory, otiose gestures are very American! In other words, if “racial ambiguity” or looking that way, can be amplified and translated into a legitimate political interest (as it is increasingly becoming a commercial one), then the padded new racism that comes about as a result will gladly declare a new class of winners. But the historical reality (which the nineteen-year olds are not aware of, and neither this author, nor anyone else has informed them of it) is that racial ambiguity is itself a new-world thematic – probably about seven centuries old by now – so that 300 million coeval Americans, all of them, could check off several race boxes on the decennial census form, and
who could argue with them? But I suspect that the citizen-taxpayer is not thinking, first and foremost, about traditional race ascription when she responds to the census taker’s queries, but, rather, by what cultural name she is interpellated. Saulny apparently found out (and how silly is this?) that President Obama, for instance, checked only one box on his 2010 census form, and that was the black one, while he could have checked two, Saulny trumpets. Well, yes, he could have checked two, but this President likely has a solid grasp of race and how it operates in the social and political context of the United States, and to call oneself mixed-race, or black and white, or something and something else, means what? What work is that supposed to do for you?

When black students organized on predominantly white campuses across the country a generation ago, the founders of those movements had certain cultural and political aims in mind; they were not in association because they were black, I would wager, but because their blackness was freighted with stigmatic affect, engendered long before the punctuality of their appearance. It was, therefore, their historical burden to respond to what came before, to what they had inherited, and it had little or nothing to do with them as individuals, although it was as individuals in concert with others that they were compelled to respond. Students at Maryland, or anywhere else, for that matter, have every right to freely associate on whatever basis they wish. They may even do so stupidly, but it strikes my mind as the rankest of vanities that in this new century the herald of mixed-race is taking us backward into the latest avatar of the reification of race.
Works Cited
