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## The Illogic of American Racial Categories

PAUL R. SPICKARD

### The Mulatto to His Critics

Ashamed of my race?  
And of what race am I?  
I am many in one.  
Thru my veins there flows the blood  
Of Red Man, Black Man, Briton, Celt and Scot  
In warring clash and tumultuous riot.  
I welcome all,  
But love the blood of the kindly race  
That swarthes my skin, crinkles my hair  
And puts sweet music into my soul.

JOSEPH COTTER (1918/1990).  
From *Joseph Seamon Cottor, Jr.: Complete Poems*,  
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This poem by Joseph Cotter, a promising African American poet who died young early in this century, highlights several of the ways Americans think about race. What is a race? And, if we can figure that out, what is a person of mixed race? These are central questions of this essay and this book.

In most people's minds, as apparently in Cotter's, race is a fundamental organizing principle of human affairs. Everyone has a race, and only one. The races are biologically and characterologically separate one from another, and they are at least potentially in conflict with one another. Race has something to do with blood (today we might say genes), and something to do with skin color, and something to do with the geographical origins of one's ancestors. According to this

way of thinking, people with more than one racial ancestry have a problem, one that can be resolved only by choosing a single racial identity.

It is my contention in this essay, however, that race, while it has some relationship to biology, is not mainly a biological matter. Race is primarily a sociopolitical construct. The sorting of people into this race or that in the modern era has generally been done by powerful groups for the purposes of maintaining and extending their own power. Not only is race something different from what many people have believed it to be, but people of mixed race are not what many people have assumed them to be. As the other essays in this volume amply demonstrate, people with more than one racial ancestry do not necessarily have a problem. And, in contrast to Cotter's earlier opinion, these days people of mixed parentage are often choosing for themselves something other than a single racial identity.

### Race as a Biological Category

In the thinking of most Europeans and Americans (and these ideas have spread around the world in the last century), humankind can be divided into four or five discrete races. This is an extension of the admittedly artificial system of classification of all living things first constructed by Swedish botanist and taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus in the eighteenth century. According to the Linnaean system, human beings are all members of the kingdom *Animalia*, the phylum *Chordata*, the class *Mammalia*, the order *Primates*, the family *Homididae*, the genus *Homo*, and the species *Homo sapiens*. Each level of this pyramid contains subdivisions of the level above. In the nineteenth century, pseudoscientific racists such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1865/1973) and Joseph Arthur, comte de Gobineau (1915/1967), tried to extend the system down one more level to human *races*, on the basis of geography and observed physical differences. Details of the versions differed, but most systems of categorization divided humankind up into at least red, yellow, black, and white: Native Americans, Asians, Africans, and Europeans. Whether Australian aborigines, Bushmen, and various brown-skinned peoples—Polynesians and Malays, for example—constituted separate races depended on who was doing the categorizing.

There has been considerable argument, in the nineteenth century and since, over the nature of these "races." The most common view

has been to see races as distinct *types*. That is, there were supposed to have been at some time in the past four or five utterly distinct and pure races, with physical features, gene pools, and character qualities that diverged entirely one from another. Over millennia there had been some mixing at the margins, but the observer could still distinguish a Caucasian type (light of skin, blue-eyed, possessing fine sandy hair, a high-bridged nose, thin lips, and so on), a Negroid type (dark brown of skin, brown-eyed, with tightly curled black hair, a broad flat nose, thick lips, and so on), an Asian type, and so on. There was debate as to whether these varieties of human beings all proceeded from the same first humans or there was a separate genesis for each race. The latter view tended to regard the races as virtual separate species, as far apart as house cats and cougars; the former saw them as more like breeds of dogs—spaniels, collies, and so forth. The typological view of races developed by Europeans arranged the peoples of the world hierarchically, with Caucasians at the top, Asians next, then Native Americans, and Africans at the bottom—in terms of both physical abilities and moral qualities.<sup>1</sup>

Successors in this tradition further subdivided the races into subunits, each again supposed to carry its own distinctive physical, genotypical, and moral characteristics. Madison Grant (1918/1970) divided the Caucasian race into five subunits: the Nordic race, the Alpine race, the Mediterranean race, the extinct races of the Upper Paleolithic period (such as Cro-Magnon humans), and the extinct races of the Middle Paleolithic period (including Neanderthal humans).<sup>2</sup> Each of the modern Caucasian subunits, according to Grant, included at least five further subdivisions. Each of the major subunits bore a distinctive typical stature, skin color, eye color, hair color, hair texture, facial shape, nose type, skull shape, and cephalic index.<sup>3</sup> Each was also supposed to carry distinctive intellectual and moral qualities, with the Nordic being the highest type. According to Henry Fairfield Osborn (1924; cited in Barzun, 1937/1965, p. 224), even where there was achievement of distinction in non-Nordic peoples, it came from a previous infusion of Nordic genes. He contended in a *New York Times* article that Raphael, Cervantes, Leonardo, Galileo, Titian, Botticelli, Petrarch, Columbus, Richelieu, Lafayette, Joffre, Clemenceau, Rodin, Racine, Napoleon, Garibaldi, and dozens of other Continentals were all actually of Nordic origin—hence their genius. In similar fashion, pseudoscientific racists saw White bloodlines as the source of the evident capabilities of Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, and George Washington Carver.<sup>4</sup>

In the twentieth century, an increasing number of scientists have taken exception to the notion of races as types. James C. King (1981), perhaps the foremost American geneticist on racial matters, denounces the typological view as “make-believe” (p. 112).<sup>5</sup> Biologists and physical anthropologists are more likely to see races as *subspecies*. That is, they recognize the essential commonality of all humans, and see races as geographically and biologically diverging populations. Thus physical anthropologist Alice Brues (1977) sees a race as “a division of a species which differs from other divisions by the frequency with which certain hereditary traits appear among its members” (p. 1). They see all human populations, in all times and places, as mixed populations. There never were any “pure” races. Nonetheless, there are populations in geographical localities that can be distinguished from each other by statistically significant frequencies of various genetic or physical traits, from blood type to hair color to susceptibility to sickle-cell anemia. Most such thinkers have agreed, however, that the idea of race is founded in biology. Nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans spoke of blood as the agent of the transmission of racial characteristics. More recently, genes have been accorded the same role once assigned to blood.

The most important thing about races was the boundaries between them. If races were pure (or had once been), and if one were a member of the race at the top, then it was essential to maintain the boundaries that defined one's superiority, to keep people from the lower categories from slipping surreptitiously upward. Hence U.S. law took pains to define just who was in which racial category. Most of the boundary drawing came on the border between White and Black. The boundaries were drawn on the basis not of biology—genotype and phenotype—but of descent. For purposes of the laws of nine southern and border states in the early part of this century, a “Negro” was defined as someone with a single Negro great-grandparent; in three other southern states, a Negro great-great-grandparent would suffice. That is, a person with 15 White ancestors four generations back and a single Negro ancestor at the same remove was reckoned a Negro in the eyes of the law (Spickard, 1989, pp. 374-375; Stephenson, 1910, pp. 12-20).

But what was a “Negro”? It turned out that, for the purposes of the court, a Negro ancestor was simply any person who was socially regarded as a Negro. That person might have been the descendant of several Caucasians along with only a single African. Thus far less than one-sixteenth actual African ancestry was required in order for an

individual to be regarded as an African American. In practice—both legal and customary—anyone with *any* known African ancestry was deemed an African American, while only those without any trace of known African ancestry were called Whites. This was known as the “one-drop rule”: One drop of Black blood made one an African American. In fact, of course, it was not about blood—or biology—at all. People with no discernible African genotype or phenotype were regarded as Black on the basis of the fact that they had grandfathers or other remote relatives who were socially regarded as Black, and they had no choice in the matter (see, elsewhere in this volume, essays by Daniel, Chapter 8; Hall, Chapter 18; Williams, Chapter 20). The boundaries were drawn in this manner to maintain an absolute wall surrounding White dominance.

This leads one to the conclusion that race is primarily about culture and social structure, not biology. As geneticist King (1981) admits:

Both what constitutes a race and how one recognizes a racial difference are culturally determined. Whether two individuals regard themselves as of the same or of different races depends not on the degree of similarity of their genetic material but on whether history, tradition, and personal training and experiences have brought them to regard themselves as belonging to the same group or to different groups. . . . there are no objective boundaries to set off one subspecies from another. (pp. 156-157)

The process of racial labeling starts with geography, culture, and family ties and runs through economics and politics to biology, and not the other way around. That is, a group is defined by an observer according to its location, its cultural practices, or its social connectedness (and their subsequent economic, social, and political implications). Then, on looking at physical markers or genetic makeup, the observer may find that this group shares certain items with greater frequency than do other populations that are also socially defined. But even in such cases, there is tremendous overlap between racial categories with regard to biological features. As King (1981) writes, “Genetic variability within populations is greater than the variability between them” (p. 158).

Take the case of skin color. Suppose people can all be arranged according to the color of their skin along a continuum:

darkest 2 3 4 5 6 7 lightest

The people Americans call Black would nearly all fall on the darker end of the continuum, while the people we call White would nearly all fall on the lighter end:

	darkest	2	3	4	5	6	7	lightest
Blacks		-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	
Whites								-----

On the *average*, the White and Black populations are distinct from each other in skin color. But a very large number of individuals who are classified as White have darker skin color than some people classified as Black, and vice versa. The so-called races are not biological categories at all; rather, they are primarily social divisions that rely only partly on physical markers such as skin color to identify group membership.

Sometimes, skin color and social definitions run counter to one another. Take the case of Walter White and Poppy Cannon (Cannon, 1952). In the 1930s and 1940s, White was one of the most prominent African American citizens in the United States. An author and activist, he served for 20 years as the executive secretary of the NAACP. Physically, White was short, slim, blond, and blue-eyed. On the street he would not have been taken for an African American by anyone who did not know his identity. But he had been raised in the South in a family of very light-skinned Blacks, and he was socially defined as Black, both by others and by himself. He dedicated his life and career to serving Black Americans. In 1949, White divorced his African American wife of many years' standing and married Cannon, a White journalist and businesswoman. Although Cannon was a Caucasian socially and ancestrally, her hair, eyes, and skin were several shades darker than her new husband's. If a person were shown pictures of the couple and told that one partner was Caucasian and the other Black, without doubt that person would have selected Cannon as the Afro-American. Yet, immediately upon White's divorce, there was an eruption of protest in the Black press. White was accused of having sold out his race for a piece of White flesh, and Cannon of having seduced one of Black America's most beloved leaders. White segregationists took the occasion to crow that this was what Black advocates of civil rights really wanted: access to White women. All the acrimony and confusion took place because Walter White was socially Black and Poppy Cannon was socially White; biology—at least physical appearance—had nothing to do with it.

All of this is not to argue that there is no biological aspect to race, only that biology is not fundamental. The origins of race are sociocultural and political, and the main ways race is used are sociocultural and political. Race can be used for good as well as for ill. For example, one may use the socially defined category Black to target for study and treatment a population with a greater likelihood of suffering from sickle-cell anemia. That is an efficient and humane use of a racial category. Nonetheless, the origins of racial distinctions are to be found in culture and social structure, not in biology.

### Race as a Social Category

Race, then, is primarily a social construct. It has been constructed in different ways in different times and places. In 1870, the U.S. Bureau of the Census divided up the American population into races: White, Colored (Blacks), Colored (Mulattoes), Chinese, and Indian (U.S. Department of Interior, 1872, pp. 606-609). In 1950, the census categories reflected a different social understanding: White, Black, and Other. By 1980, the census categories reflected the ethnic blossoming of the previous two decades: White, Black, Hispanic, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, American Indian, Asian Indian, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Samoan, Eskimo, Aleut, and Other. In England in 1981, the categories were quite different: White, West Indian, African, Arab, Turkish, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and Other—because the sociopolitical landscape in England demanded different divisions (Banton, 1983, pp. 56-57). (The fact that some of these are also nationality labels should not obscure the fact that many in the United States and Great Britain treat them as domestic racial units.) In South Africa, there are four racial categories: White, African, Coloured, and Asian (Fredrickson, 1981). In Brazil, the gradations between Black and White are many: *preto*, *cabra*, *escuro*, *mulato escuro*, *mulato claro*, *pardo*, *sarará*, *moreno*, and *branco de terra* (Degler, 1971, p. 103). Each of these systems of racial classification reflects a different social, economic, and political reality. Such social situations change, and so do racial categories.

Social distinctions such as race and class come about when two or more groups of people come together in a situation of economic or status competition. Frequently such competition results in stratification—in the domination of some groups by others. People in Africa

did not experience their lives as Africans or as Blacks; they were Hausa or Ibo or Fon, or members of any of several other groups. But when they were brought to America they were defined as a single group by the Europeans who held power over their lives. They were lumped together as Africans or Negroes or Blacks, partly because they shared certain physical similarities, especially when contrasted with Europeans, and partly because they shared a common status as slaves (W. D. Jordan, 1969).

From the point of view of the dominant group, racial distinctions are a necessary tool of dominance. They serve to separate the subordinate people as Other. Putting simple, neat racial labels on dominated peoples—and creating negative myths about the moral qualities of those peoples—makes it easier for the dominators to ignore the individual humanity of their victims. It eases the guilt of oppression. Calling various African peoples all one racial group, and associating that group with evil, sin, laziness, bestiality, sexuality, and irresponsibility, made it easier for White slave owners to rationalize holding their fellow humans in bondage, whipping them, selling them, separating their families, and working them to death (Fredrickson, 1971; W. D. Jordan, 1969). The function of the one-drop rule was to solidify the barrier between Black and White, to make sure that no one who might possibly be identified as Black also became identified as White. For a mixed person, then, acceptance of the one-drop rule means internalizing the oppression of the dominant group, buying into the system of racial domination.

Race is by no means only negative, however. From the point of view of subordinate peoples, race can be a positive tool, a source of belonging, mutual help, and self-esteem. Racial categories (and ethnic categories, for they function in the same way)<sup>6</sup> identify a set of people with whom to share a sense of identity and common experience. To be a Chinese American is to share with other Chinese Americans at least the possibility of free communication and a degree of trust that may not be shared with non-Chinese. It is to share access to common institutions—Chinese churches, Chinatowns, and Chinese civic associations. It is to share a sense of common history—immigration, work on the railroads and in the mines of the West, discrimination, exclusion, and a decades-long fight for respectability and equal rights. It is to share a sense of peoplehood that helps locate individuals psychologically, and also provides the basis for common political action. Race, this socially constructed identity, can be a powerful tool, either for oppression or for group self-actualization.

### At the Margins: Race as Self-Definition

Where does this leave the person of mixed parentage? Such people have long suffered from a negative public image. In 1912, French psychologist Gustave LeBon contended that "mixed breeds are ungovernable" (quoted in Barzun, 1937/1965, p. 227). American sociologist Edward Reuter (1931/1969) wrote that "the mixed blood is [by definition] an unadjusted person" (p. 216). Writers and filmmakers from Thomas Nelson Page to D. W. Griffith to William Faulkner have presented mixed people as tormented souls (Spickard, 1989, pp. 329-339). Yet, as the other essays in this volume make clear, even if such a picture of pathology and marginal identity has ever been partially accurate, it certainly is no longer the case.

What is a person of mixed race? Biologically speaking, we are all mixed. That is, we all have genetic material from a variety of populations, and we all exhibit physical characteristics that testify to mixed ancestry. Biologically speaking, there never have been any pure races—all populations are mixed.

More to the point is the question of to which socially defined category people of mixed ancestry belong. The most illogical part of all this racial categorizing is not that we imagine it is about biology. After all, there *is* a biological component to race, or at least we identify biological referents—physical markers—as a kind of shorthand to stand for what are essentially socially defined groups. What is most illogical is that we imagine these racial categories to be exclusive. The U.S. Census form says, "Check one box." If a person checks "Other," his or her identity and connection with any particular group is immediately erased. Yet what is a multiracial person to do?

Once, a person of mixed ancestry had little choice. Until fairly recently, for example, most Americans of part Japanese or part Chinese ancestry had to present themselves to the world as non-Asians, for the Asian ethnic communities to which they might have aspired to be connected would not have them.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the 1920s, 7-year-old Peter fended for himself on the streets of Los Angeles. He had been thrown out of the house shortly after his Mexican American mother died, when his Japanese American father married a Japanese woman, because the stepmother could not stand the thought of a half-Mexican boy living under her roof. No Japanese American individual or community institution was willing to take him in because he was not pure Japanese (Spickard, 1989, pp. 110-117).

On the other hand, the one-drop rule meant that part-Black people were forced to reckon themselves Black. Some might pass for White, but by far the majority of children of African American intermarriages chose or were forced to be Black. A student from a mixed family described his feelings in the 1970s: "At home I see my mom and dad and I'm part of both of them. But when I walk outside that door, it's like my mom doesn't exist. I'm just Black. Everybody treats me that way." When he filled out his census form, this student checked the box marked "Black" (Spickard, 1989, pp. 329-339, 360-361).

The salient point here is that once, before the last third of the twentieth century, multiracial individuals did not generally have the opportunity to choose identities for themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, however, individuals began to assert their right to choose their own identities—to claim belonging to more than one group, or to create new identities (see essays in this volume by Kich, Chapter 21; Thornton, Chapter 22; Williams, Chapter 20). By 1990, Mary Waters could write, "One of the most basic choices we have is whether to apply an ethnic label to ourselves" (p. 52). She was speaking of a choice of ethnic identities from among several White options, such as Italian, Irish, and Polish. Yet the concept of choice began to apply to mixed people of color as well.

Some even dared to refuse to choose. In 1985 I observed a wise Caucasian-Chinese 5-year-old. Dining with her family in Boston's Chinatown during Chinese New Year, she was asked insistently by an adult Chinese friend of the family, "Which are you really—Chinese or American?" It was clear the woman wanted her to say she was really Chinese. But the girl replied simply, "I don't have to choose. I'm both." And so she was.

This child probably could not have articulated it, but she was arguing that races are not types. One ought not be thrust into a category: Chinese or American, White or Black. Her answer calls on us to move our focus from the boundaries between groups—where we carefully assign this person to the White category and that person to the Black category—to the centers. That is, we ought to pay attention to the things that characterize groups and hold them together, to the content of group identity and activity, to patterns and means of inclusiveness and belonging. A mixed person should not be regarded as Black *or* White, but as Black *and* White, with access to both parts of his or her identity. In the poem presented at the outset of this essay, Joseph Cotter's mulatto felt the pull of the various parts of his

heritage, but felt constrained to choose only one. In the 1990s, that choice is still available to mixed people, but it is no longer *necessary*. Today a person of mixed ancestry can choose to embrace all the parts of his or her background. Many of the essays in this volume are about the issues attendant upon such a choice of a multiethnic identity. As the essays attest, the one-drop rule no longer applies.

### Notes

1. There were two ways of conceiving this hierarchy, depending on which side of the Darwinian divide one inhabited. Pre-Darwinians thought of Adam and Eve as Caucasians, with Asians, Africans, and Native Americans representing degenerated descendants in separate lines. Those who came after Darwin and embraced the evolutionary view conceived of the human races as part of a continuum of ever-improving species and races, with great apes succeeded by chimpanzees, then by Africans, Asians, and Caucasians. The last were seen as the most complex and perfect of evolution's products (King, 1981, pp. 125-126).

2. The Nordics were people who could trace unmixed ancestry from Scandinavia, northern Germany, or the British Isles. Alpines were most minority peoples of Europe (Bretons, Basques, Walloons, and so on), French, southern Germans, northern Italians, Swiss, Russians, other East Europeans, and so on. Mediterraneans included Iberians, southern Italians, northern Africans, Hindus, Persians, and many Middle Easterners.

3. The cephalic index was the ratio of the breadth of the head to its length, expressed as a percentage.

4. Lest the reader think that these are all outdated ideas that no longer have impact, it should be noted that John R. Baker published a massive volume of pseudoscientific racism in 1974 that echoed the ideas of Blumenbach, Gobineau, and Grant. In addition, the 1982 edition of the Bartholomew *World Atlas* contains a map that divides up the world by skin color:

#### Light Skin Colour (Leocodermi)

Indo-European: White skin, straight to wavy hair

Indo-European: Light brown skin, wavy hair

Hamitic-Semitic: Reddish brown skin, wavy hair

Polynesian: Light brown skin, wavy hair

#### Yellow Skin Colour (Xanthodermi)

Asiatic or Mongolian: Yellow skin, straight hair

Indonesian: Yellow brown skin, straight hair

American Indian: Reddish yellow skin, straight hair

#### Dark Skin Colour (Melanodermi)

African Negro: Dark brown skin, kinky hair

Pigmy Negro: Brown skin, kinky hair

Melanesian: Dark brown skin, kinky hair

Australo-Dravidian: Brown to black skin, wavy to kinky hair

There is also a map dividing the world by cephalic index:

Dolichocephalic (Long-headed)—primarily the peoples of Africa, Arabia, India, and Australia

Mesocephalic (Medium-headed)—Northwest Europe, North America, China, Japan, Persia

Brachycephalic (Broad-headed)—rest of Europe, Latin America, rest of Asia

Hyperbrachycephalic (Very broad-headed)—Russia

What the mapmakers imagine they are measuring and classifying is unclear, but it is clear that pseudoscientific racism is alive.

5. One must be careful of even this appeal to argument by scientists. Much of the allure of the Blumenbach argument was that it was put forth on the supposed basis of science. Since some people regard science with a kind of ritual awe, they are unable to think critically about any idea, however preposterous, put forth in the name of science.

6. Since both are defined on the basis of social and not biological criteria, a race and an ethnic group are in essence the same type of group. They reckon (real or imagined) descent from a common set of ancestors. They have a sense of identity that tells them they are one people. They share culture, from clothing to music to food to language to child-rearing practices. They build institutions such as churches and fraternal organizations. They perceive and pursue common political and economic interests (Cornell, 1985; Spickard, 1989, pp. 9-17).

7. This was true for people of mixed Jewish and Gentile background as well: They were shunned by Jewish people and institutions and typically had to adopt Gentile identities.

8. Sometimes the assignments were a bit arbitrary. Anthropologist Max Stanton tells of meeting three brothers in Dulac, Louisiana, in 1969. All were Houma Indians, had a French last name, and shared the same father and mother. All received their racial designations at the hands of the medical people who assisted at their births. The oldest brother, born before 1950 at home with the aid of a midwife, was classified as a Negro, because the state of Louisiana did not recognize the Houma as Indians before 1950. The second brother, born in a local hospital after 1950, was assigned to the Indian category. The third brother, born 80 miles away in a New Orleans hospital, was designated White on the basis of the French family name (M. Stanton, personal communication, 1990; see Stanton, 1971).

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MIXED  
PEOPLE  
IN  
AMERICA**

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