

## Preface

IN DECEMBER 2003, the *New York Times* celebrated “Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous”<sup>1</sup> as members of society’s hip new A-list, hailing racially mixed people as ambassadors to a new world order, the fashionable imprimaturs of modernity. Galvanized by the Office of Management and Budget’s Statistical Directive 15 of the 2000 Census—which allowed for an unprecedented “mark one or more” (MOOM) racial option—advocates for mixed race legal identification have gained tremendous political leverage and national recognition. Focused on spreading the Good News of the mixed race experience, dozens of advocacy organizations, websites, magazines, media watches, public awareness campaigns, mixed heritage centers, support groups, summer camps, festivals, podcasts, and blogs have emerged since the 1990s, networking an evolving coalition of interracial couples, families with transracial adoptees, and young people self-identifying as mixed race. U.S. multinational industries regularly exploit mixed race as a hot commodity, showcasing ethnically ambiguous spokespeople as corporate representatives.<sup>2</sup> The dramatic increase in the public visibility and popularity of mixed race has also drawn academic attention, according it the status of a sub-speciality in philosophy, political



FIGURE P.1. *Maintaining*, July 22, 2009. MAINTAINING © 2007 & 2008 Nate Creekmore. Reprinted by permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

science, sociology, psychology, and education, among other disciplines. As I explore in *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, education, in particular—as both an academic field and a commercial industry—has been especially active in canonizing certain normative models of mixed race as a uniquely post-civil rights identity and experience.

Critical attention to the proselytizing of mixed race acquires some urgency, in part, because its fêting as an up-and-coming legal and experiential category has occurred in inverse relation to the perceived irrelevancy of race, in general, and civil rights campaigns, in particular. Not accidentally, the ascension of mixed race popularity has been enabled in the post-race, “post soul”<sup>3</sup> era, and in concert with the quiet dismantling of affirmative action and the weakening of traditional civil rights lobbies. In 1995, Maria P. P. Root hailed mixed race as the “new frontier”;<sup>4</sup> the next year, Stanley Crouch proclaimed that “race is over.”<sup>5</sup> Since then, others also have rung race’s death knell: Holland Cotter in a 2001 piece in the *New York Times* stated that the time for “ethno-racial identity” is past, that we are now witnessing the coming of “postblack or postethnic art.”<sup>6</sup> Debra Dickerson demands the “end of blackness.”<sup>7</sup> Anthony Appiah advances a “new cosmopolitanism”<sup>8</sup> that celebrates cultural contamination over what he casts as antiquated tribalism and identity politics. Ethnic hybridity, we are told, heralds a liberating “racelessness” (Naomi Zack),<sup>9</sup> a step “beyond race” (Ellis Cose),<sup>10</sup> the “end of racism” (Dinesh D’Souza),<sup>11</sup> a gesture “against race” (Paul Gilroy),<sup>12</sup> a “new racial order” (G. Reginald Daniel)<sup>13</sup> freed of a supposedly irresistible essentialism (Walter Benn Michaels).<sup>14</sup> Shelby Steele opines in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “black-studies programs” are already dinosaur relics of politics past.<sup>15</sup> However, such epitaphs might seem not only premature but suspect: as Toni Morrison in “Unspeaking Things Unspoken” asks, how and why now, after three hundred years of institutionalized racism in the United States, are some people claiming by fiat that “race” is over?<sup>16</sup> And, some skeptics might legitimately also ask, just how and why now does the notion of mixed race acquire such cachet amidst this welter of race transcendence?

This book seeks a middle way between the competing hagiographic and apocalyptic impulses in mixed race scholarship, between those who espouse mixed race as the great hallelujah to the “race problem” and

those who can only hear the alarmist bells of civil rights destruction. Both approaches can obscure some of the more critically astute engagements with new millennial iterations of mixed race by the multi-generic cohort of contemporary writers, artists, and performers discussed in this book. *The Souls of Mixed Folk* offers case studies of creative works that consider the claims of mixed race to modernity—particularly in relation to antediluvian blackness—as an aesthetic challenge as well as a social concern. I move from a brief discussion of artist Lezley Saar’s installation, *Mulatto Nation* (2002), to extended considerations of two nationally syndicated newsprint comic-strips, Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* (1996–2006) and Nate Creekmore’s *Maintaining* (2006–2009). I then turn to the novels of Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2001), Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (2000), Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (1998) and *Symptomatic* (2005), and Emily Raboteau, *The Professor’s Daughter* (2005), as well as to performances of Carl Hancock Rux’s play, *Talk* (2002), and Dave Chappelle’s late-night television episode, “The Racial Draft” (2004), from *The Dave Chappelle Show*. All are examples of literary and expressive arts that critique and expand the contemporary idiom about mixed race in the so-called post-race moment. With this focus, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* also seeks to reorient academic and public attention towards the humanities’ largely overlooked but crucial participation in the production of mixed race’s cultural meanings. As Susan Koshy argues in “Why the Humanities Matter for Race Studies Today,” transformations in racial understandings frequently elude social science frameworks, for they “often erupt and are manifested in films, stories, theatrical and quotidian performances, and new media before they assume a social density and critical mass that enable empirical analysis of these phenomena. In other words, they inhabit and operate in a dimension of the human and the social that the humanities are uniquely positioned to investigate and illuminate.”<sup>17</sup> At stake is the future direction for mixed race critical inquiry: specifically, how might new millennial expressive forms suggest an aesthetics of mixed race? And how might such an aesthetics productively reimagine the relations between race, art, and social justice in the twenty-first century?

The title, *The Souls of Mixed Folk*, is taken from a frame in Creekmore’s *Maintaining* in which two mixed race characters, Lepidus and Marcus,

argue about loyalty to what Marcus has cleverly coined the “Halffrican [American] Movement,” discussed at length in Chapter Two. I borrow Lepidus’ line for the title of this book for several reasons. First, the expression ironically invokes, of course, W. E. B. Du Bois’ famous *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) as part of the comic strip’s send-up of the overreaching ambitions and hyperbolic rhetoric of some in the mixed race movement who advertise mixed race people as new millennial beings with special souls that warrant their own manifestos. Second, Lepidus’ appropriation of Du Bois reflects the intraracial anxiety of influence common in mixed race advocacy efforts that seek to establish a tradition unique to the “new colored people”<sup>18</sup> by laying claim to early intellectual thought and literature historically associated with African American culture. Many of the authors and artists examined in this book directly address this tension and explore the possibilities for a mixed race expressivity that is continuous with, rather than parallel to, a capacious African American tradition constantly in dialogue and debate with itself. The title’s oblique summoning of Du Bois in particular is also significant because so many of the works discussed here often explicitly pay homage to his theory of double consciousness as social insight, his meditations on the political claims of art, and his fascination with the narrative possibilities of mixed race. Third, and perhaps most significantly, I draw the title from *Maintaining* because it samples an alternative vehicle for representing mixed race politics, in this case the middlebrow form of the graphic narrative, and thus is emblematic of one of the many experiments in aesthetics and politics at the heart of *The Souls of Mixed Folk*. I hope, therefore, it is obvious that far from the impudence of implying any comparison between this book and Du Bois’, I intend the title to signify on Creekmore’s own humorous and gentle dig at all those who might, in fact, wish for a treatise about mixed folks’ souls. The title is meant to both evoke and unsettle expectations, to prepare the reader for examples of art, literature, comics, and drama that collectively reframe any such conversations about the “spiritual strivings”<sup>19</sup> of mixed race people.

Several aesthetic, historical, and political rationales tied to post-civil rights politics, history, and identity yoke especially McGruder, Creekmore, Senna, Raboteau, Whitehead, Rux, and Chappelle. I lay them out here also as a road map to the Introduction, which explores more fully the public

discourses and debates shaping and being reshaped by these works. Despite their many generic differences, an aesthetic principle uniting all here is the commitment to art as a subtle form of social action—an “aesthetics of resistance,”<sup>20</sup> or as Du Bois puts it, a way of seeking “with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right.”<sup>21</sup> They collectively gesture towards a political aesthetics that imagines art as both an instrument and an end in itself. These works are not propagandistic, but neither do they bear only an attenuated or ornamental relation to social justice concerns. Their engagement emerges both through a thematic interest in mixed race politics as well as through formal aesthetic structures that together interpret the Rorschach blot of the national angst and ambition that is mixed race.

Most often, these works’ alternative modes do not involve explicitly imagining or narratively thematizing a vision of a better world or even necessarily a better way. Their aesthetic style more frequently *enacts* the limitations on forms of expression or political sensibilities that might inhibit the imaginative realization of an alternative world, performing a formal meta-commentary on the problem of representing hard-to-solve and sometimes hard-to-see social and racial inequities. This species of text, even when deploying humor, is not especially joyful or uplifting. The works do not offer manuals for enlightenment (which is precisely what so many mixed race memoirs and popular publications do); they do not offer exemplary characters who model “the answer” (which, unfortunately, is repeatedly expected of ethnic literature generally); and neither do they offer one of the most popular forms of compensation for decades of pathologizing mixed race: the creation of professional guidelines for rearing healthy multiracial children. In fact, these texts might rightly be censored reading for those looking for “positive identity formation and empowerment in children of mixed heritage.”<sup>22</sup> Instead, they offer experiments across genre (narrative, graphic, performance) that validate mixed race experiences as opportunities for social insight without administering prescriptive morals or promising emancipatory politics.

Furthermore, they are all artistic creations responding directly to the perception that post-civil rights politics are bereft of substance and meaning. Specifically, they represent rejoinders to the absence of a robust new millennial political language for social justice. Part of the challenge they

address is a growing appreciation that the packaging of multiracials as the vanguard of the future too often casts traditional civil rights organizations and ethnic studies programs as outdated, associated with 1970s tribal politics by old-fashioned “monoracials.” Obama’s millennial multi-culti cool just seems so much more *du jour* than Jesse Jackson, Sr.’s last-century ethnic pride. In fact, one of the most acute challenges facing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2009, is the creeping sense that black people will become moot in the next century.<sup>23</sup> The texts dramatize a profound political aphasia, a frustration with much of the language of self-possessive individualism and personal choice invoked by mixed race advocates, but an inability to articulate other options or initiatives for discriminated peoples because the discourses of civil rights have been so delegitimated. Paul Gilroy terms this malaise “postcolonial melancholy”: the result of “a widespread reluctance to engage racism analytically, historically, or governmentally” because questions about “‘race,’ identity and differentiation have a distinctive, mid-twentieth century ring to them. They sometimes seem anachronistic because they do try to return contemporary discussion to a moral ground that we feel we should have left behind long ago,” and tend to elicit impatience or apathy. As Gilroy argues, “these questions have only a minimal presence in today’s incomplete genealogies of the global movement for human rights” and remain “‘on hold’ and therefore a muted part of the history of our present.”<sup>24</sup> McGruder, Senna, Raboteau, Whitehead, and Rux, especially, call on and call up this civil rights history placed on hold. They do so not to revive the “racial, ethnic, and national absolutes” (14) with which this history is often associated and peremptorily dismissed. Rather, these writers and artists invoke it because they still see race as part of the “history of our present,” even though there is a recognition that their revivification might be met with eye-rolling impatience. Their work arguably effects some measure of artistic redress for the impotency and speechlessness of post-civil rights discourse.

Gilroy’s suggestion that conversations about race are often treated as voices from a past perceived as best over and done with begins to explain what at first may seem this book’s retrograde impulse to come *back* from the “beyond black and white” paradigm in order to focus on the par-

ticular implications and significance of black-white mixes. The fact that looking at race through the lens of black and white is now considered so very twentieth-century, so *been-there-done-that*, so *tired*, is precisely part of the challenge of a post-civil rights politics that defines what is or is not *passé*, that licenses what can or cannot be said and heard. This book's "back from beyond black" orientation, justified in greater length in the Introduction, fully appreciates the importance of comparative racial studies, of the "need to understand race through the lens of intersectionality as well as through an analytic of interracialism."<sup>25</sup> But rather than see these imperatives in tension, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* considers its singular focus on the particular complexities and nuances of black-white mixes as complementary to broader comparative racial projects. In resisting the pressure common in mixed race studies to account for any and all racial combinations and variables, *The Souls of Mixed Folk* seeks to understand better the very specific cultural work of representations of the diversity of black-white mixes as a necessary precursor to analyzing their function and saliency within wider comparative racial dynamics.

Most importantly, this particular group of works are united by their aesthetic repositioning of mixed race priorities from questions of racial privacy to those of civil rights. Noting the increasing emphasis on the "personal, private, individual, and idiosyncratic rather than institutional, ideological, collective, and cumulative,"<sup>26</sup> they critique the narrowing of mixed race discourses from those of "power and economics and history"<sup>27</sup> to those of individual rights, psychological health, and family genealogy. One can see this narrowing in the debates over the U.S. Census. Some mixed race advocates, recognizing the constitutive power of the Office of Management and Budget to legally create racial identities, argue that "multiracial identity was only truly born in the U.S. with the passing of Statistical Directive 15."<sup>28</sup> But the works examined in *The Souls of Mixed Folk* challenge the imaginative and political sufficiency of what I call in the Introduction the "box fetish"—the commitment to box-checking as *the* site for social change. Instead, all explore mixed racial identity not as a special interest but as a performative mode of social engagement.

This consideration of racial identity as socially constituted and historically imbricated rather than as an Adamic self-invention informs the

gender- and genre-bending plots and images of mixed race that reimagine both self and history in this book. The first chapter, “The Mis-education of Mixed Race,” focuses on how disciplinary practices in the social sciences and in the field of education, especially, powerfully canonize or delegitimize particular images and scripts in the national conversation about mixed race and modernity. In Chapter Two, Aaron McGruder and Nate Creekmore refigure the visual conventions of mixed race to illustrate how politically situated and implicated is the act of “seeing” race. Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead, in Chapter Three, exploit the trope of racial passing in their re-visioning of new world orders that are projected well beyond the “mulatto millennium.”<sup>29</sup> Chapter Four examines other post-race fantasies in the works of Senna and Emily Raboteau in what I identify as anti-bildungsromans. These novels explore mixed race coming-of-age as a coming into the social longing for an affiliative community of people “just like us,” a separate mixed race same-sex nation within a nation. The performances of Dave Chappelle and Carl Hancock Rux in Chapter Five turn from the yearnings *of* to the yearnings *for* mixed race people—dramatizing the national, commercial, academic, and erotic investments in mixed race that point to the collaborative negotiation that defines all racial identities. Chappelle and Rux especially resist the triumphalist historical teleologies that so often anoint mixed race as cause and proof of social evolution. Notably absent are the quest narratives of climactic self-discovery so predictably commonplace in many mixed race memoirs and fiction. In these works, the meaning of racial experience emerges not through linear advances of time, narrative, and enlightenment but by sifting through dynamic palimpsests of cultural history and possible futurities that, in Senna’s, Whitehead’s, Raboteau’s, Chappelle’s, and Rux’s works, arouse a continual process of self- and national reassessment. But across all their different strategies, the novels, plays, comics, and performances in *The Souls of Mixed Folk* seek an aesthetic connection to the ethical in expressive gestures that move us towards a poetics of social justice in the twenty-first century.