

1 HABIBA IBRAHIM, *Troubling the Family: The*  
 2 *Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Mul-*  
 3 *tiracialism* (Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P,  
 2012), 256pp.

5 In his anthology *Interracialism* (2000),  
 Werner Sollors diagnosed an “American ex-  
 ceptionalism” in the policing of racialized  
 boundaries, a “300-year-long tradition” in  
 which sexual and familial relations across  
 the color line have been criminalized and  
 10 remained taboo after legalization.<sup>1</sup> The last  
 three decades, however, have experienced a  
 paradigm shift from longstanding politics of  
 the one-drop rule to the advent of multira-  
 cialism. This transformation has crystallized,  
 for instance, in an unprecedented “boom”<sup>2</sup>  
 15 of interracial life writing, the formation of multi-  
 racial activism, and in the reform of the U.S.  
 Census that now allows respondents to iden-  
 tify multiple racial affiliations. Perhaps most  
 prominently, it registered in Barack Obama’s  
 first presidential campaign which frequently  
 20 converted his interracial origins from the pre-  
 vious cultural taboo of ‘miscegenation’ into  
 the alleged fulfillment of the civil-religious  
 myth of the melting pot. As Obama put it in  
 his pivotal speech “A More Perfect Union”: “I  
 25 have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles  
 and cousins, of every race and every hue, scat-  
 tered across three continents, and for as long  
 as I live, I will never forget that in no other  
 country on earth is my story even possible.”<sup>3</sup>

This discursive shift has been accompanied  
 by a proliferation of research on phenomena of  
 30 interraciality, past and present. Works such as  
 Maria P.P. Root’s *The Multiracial Experience:  
 Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (1995) and  
 Naomi Zack’s *Race and Mixed Race* (1994) in-  
 augurated the field of ‘Mixed Race Studies,’  
 which dominantly revolved around validating

35 <sup>1</sup> Werner Sollors, ed., *Interracialism:  
 Black-White Intermarriage in American His-  
 tory, Literature and Law* (New York: Oxford  
 UP, 2000), 12.

40 <sup>2</sup> Paul Spickard, “The Subject is Mixed  
 Race: The Boom in Biracial Biography,” *Re-  
 thinking Mixed Race*, ed. David Parker and  
 Miri Song (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 76–98;  
 76.

44 <sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union”  
 (New York: New York Times). Transcript.  
 45 18 March 2008. 4. April 2014. <[http://www.  
 46 nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-  
 obama.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/18/us/politics/18text-obama.html)>.

interracial identities and relationships against  
 a historical backdrop of stigma. Within this  
 compensatory engagement, multiraciality was  
 often even inverted into another form of ex-  
 ceptionalism where the recognition of racial  
 hybridity was inscribed with the potential of  
 ushering in an era beyond racist division. This  
 celebratory investment has received sustained  
 criticism that illuminated how the emergence  
 of multiracialism, including its academic at-  
 tention, was implicitly tied to various forms  
 of antiblackness, heteronormative, and clas-  
 sist politics, as well as to an obfuscation of the  
 history and ongoing effects of enslavement  
 and “genocidal conquest.”<sup>4</sup> With her study  
*Troubling the Family: The Promise of Person-*  
*hood and the Rise of Multiracialism*, Habiba  
 Ibrahim is joining this line of critical inquiry,  
 exemplified by Jared Sexton’s *Amalgamation*  
*Schemes* (2008), Tavia Nyong’o’s *The Amal-*  
*gamation Waltz* (2009), Hortense Spillers’s  
 “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s, Too” (2011) and Mi-  
 chele Elam’s *The Souls of Mixed Folk* (2011).

Ibrahim provides an incredibly rich, black  
 feminist intervention by revealing the un-  
 acknowledged ways in which racialized gen-  
 der norms have conditioned discourses of in-  
 ter-racial familiarity and mixed race. She illus-  
 trates her thesis skillfully across a diversity  
 of material and frames the rise of multiracial-  
 ism within the temporal marks of 1997 and  
 2007, which cohere around masculinity as a  
 tacit placeholder for “idealized versions of ra-  
 cial community” (x). Whereas the year 1997  
 designates the moment when multiracialism  
 became legible to a broad American public  
 through the race controversy surrounding  
 self-identified ‘Cablinasian’ Tiger Woods, the  
 national attention around Barack Obama in  
 2007 is positioned as a time where multiracial-  
 ism has become “mainstream” (xxvi).

In an “amnesia”<sup>5</sup> about the violent condi-  
 tions of racial mixing under (and after) colo-  
 nial conquest and enslavement, multiracialism  
 has embedded itself in a foundational narra-  
 tive of progress. It begins with the legalization  
 of heterosexual interracial marriage and fam-  
 ily in the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Loving*

4 Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes:  
 Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracial-*  
*ism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 4.

5 Minelle Mahtani, *Mixed Race Amnesia:  
 Resisting the Romanticization of Multiraci-*  
*ality*. (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P,  
 2014), 3.

v. *Virginia* (1967), is followed by a “biracial baby boom,”<sup>6</sup> and aspires toward cultural legitimacy in the twenty-first century as a bridge across racial conflict. Ibrahim’s study sets out to disrupt this historiography. In an approach entitled “racial time” (2), she brings into dialogue seemingly disparate historical moments and contexts as a “genealogy” of “multiracialism’s gendered origins” (ix). Ibrahim thus unpacks how hegemonic notions of gender have been continuously been instrumentalized to displace historical and structural underpinnings of racial discourse in a desire for a “promise of neutral personhood” (2) that turns out to be misleading.

In her first chapter, Ibrahim reveals second-wave feminism “as the unspoken precondition” (13) of the mixed race movement. The feminist insight that ‘the personal is political’ is identified as the basis upon which a movement, dominated by white mothers, sought to engender change in binary racial classification. Ibrahim pinpoints that “[m]ultiracialism tacitly undermine[d] a major feminist analytic while implementing it” (15) and interrogates how a feminist strategy of resisting a broad range of systemic inequities in patriarchy was appropriated to “validate personal lives in public,” where state recognition of multiraciality on the census was (mis)understood as the fulfillment of neutral personhood. The author’s black feminist approach furthermore deconstructs the movement’s central rhetoric of ‘the family’ in regard to a naturalization of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and particularly in terms of ideologies of white, middle-class motherhood that reproduced the exclusion of black womanhood in 1960s and 1970s mainstream feminism.

Her next chapter examines this “glaring absence of black motherhood” (68) in multiracialism by revisiting the movement’s self-proclaimed foundational moment of *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Ibrahim reads the Supreme Court’s decision in “ideological concomitance” (44) with the notorious ‘Moynihan Report’ from 1965 to argue that multiracialism has legitimized itself via patriarchal-heterosexual norms that ensured a safe distance to an ongoing pathologization of black matriarchal kinship as the ostensible antithesis to

functional American family. Ibrahim traces the Moynihan Report’s oppressive legacy to 1980s crisis discourses of ‘welfare queens’ and turns to the film *Losing Isaiah* (1995) as an example of how pervasive representations of black motherhood as dysfunctional provided a foil against which white mothers could implicitly come forward as the superior caregivers for black/mixed race children in 1990s multiracialism.

In the following chapter, Ibrahim transitions to an analysis of this emergence of white maternal personhood through a comparison of the memoirs *Crossing the Color Line* (1994) by Maureen Reddy and *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness* (1996/2016) by Jane Lazarre. From the vantage point of interracial family experiences, these texts launch a critique of white supremacy, which distinguishes them from post-racial projections of the mixed race movement. Ibrahim’s investigation of these personal accounts, nevertheless, powerfully shows how gender norms again become mobilized when unfolding how the formulation of anti-racist critique and the claim to multiracial kinship both depend on presenting white, middle-class, child-centered, heterosexual motherhood as a neutral and neutralizing category. This insight is supplemented with an excursus on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as a haunting “pre-text” (83) about a repressed history of violent interracial sexuality and the enduring discursive non-personhood of black maternity as “the ghosts that threaten to disorganize multiracial kinship” (30).

Ibrahim considers the rhetorical emphasis on white maternal affect as a crucial reason why multiracialism was appropriated by neo-conservative forces that stand at the center of analysis in her final chapter. Looking comparatively at James McBride’s memoir *The Color of Water* (1995) and Philip Roth’s novel *The Human Stain* (2000), Ibrahim examines how the “anachronistic” (124) trope of racial passing in the 1990s negotiate a larger turn toward politics of colorblindness. While both texts are analyzed in their desire for the transcendence of “historical logics of racial categorization” (124), McBride’s memoir is ultimately understood as “actively return[ing] to the relevance of race and to the racial and ethnic vicissitudes of history” (131) in the post-Civil Rights era. The passing narrative in *The Human Stain*, however, is identified as “ahistorical support” (156) for ideologies of colorblindness through an astonishing multilayered reading,

<sup>6</sup> Maria P.P. Root, ed., *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), xv.

1 where—among a host of interwoven insights  
 2 on form, gender, race, ethnicity, class, public  
 3 and private—black motherhood is shown to be  
 5 metaphorically murdered for the protagonist’s  
 claim to “American personhood” (147) in the  
 form of white masculinity.

Ibrahim’s conclusion not only picks up all  
 the various strands of her individual chapters  
 but interweaves them to provide a closing case  
 study in which Obama’s entry on the national  
 political stage as a symbol of multiracialism  
 10 and post-racialism is screened in terms of its  
 gendered preconditions. The euphoric recep-  
 tion of Obama is understood as an affirmation  
 of the “promise of personhood,” the hope of  
 having seemingly overcome the “normative  
 15 epistemologies that still determine which sort  
 of individuality can appear in public” (169). In  
 an elegant move, Ibrahim reclaims the analy-  
 tic of ‘the personal is political’ for women  
 of color feminism and upends the ‘arrival’  
 of multiracialism and its “racial hero” (208).  
 Drawing on Cherríe Moraga’s autobiographi-  
 cal (personal-political) article on Obama’s  
 20 election night, the author elaborates on how  
 the rise of Obama, like the rise of multiracial-  
 ism, depended on ideal personhood as tacitly  
 masculine, on a narrative of white, middle-  
 class, heterosexual maternity, and, crucially,

on the absence of a black maternal back-  
 ground. With this perspective on the omis-  
 sions and obfuscations that made multiracial-  
 ism possible, Ibrahim also draws attention to  
 other ‘queer’ subjects such as Guantánamo  
 detainees whose personhood is denied and  
 “destroy[ed]” (172) by a nation state that mul-  
 tiracialism had turned to as a seemingly neu-  
 25 tral resource for legitimization.

Ibrahim’s challenging conclusion reflects  
 her overall insightful intersectional approach,  
 which does not necessarily reject a multiracial  
 project per se but one that hinges on the fan-  
 tasy of the state-sanctioned family as a natural  
 and neutral site of redemptive intimacy. Along  
 these lines, she closes by pointing toward al-  
 ternative endeavors that understand person-  
 hood “at the intersection of identity and op-  
 30 pression” (172) and make “health, safety, and  
 liberty of socially underprivileged persons a  
 public priority” (172). Hopefully, this brilliant  
 study will find productive resonances in a field  
 that has recently reinvented itself as the self-  
 reflexive enterprise of ‘Critical Mixed Race  
 Studies’ to engage with the tensions, contra-  
 35 dictions, and exclusions that are inscribed into  
 the multiracial era.

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