

# Solidifying Multiracial Culture

by Rebecca R. Bibbs

My sister Miriam could hardly contain her excitement as she pointed at a child with honey-colored skin and corkscrew curls of the same shade moving freely on her head. Seconds later, Miriam's attention was diverted to another caramel-skinned child, whose ponytail engaged in a test of wills against the rubber band from which strands of auburn-colored hair escaped to make a gossamer halo.

Miriam and I were at my son Raphael's kindergarten open house three years ago. And never had we seen so many multiracial children in any one place. When we were growing up during the 1960s and 1970s, she and I often were the only biracial children almost anywhere we went. What we'd always sought — and what Miriam found for a brief time during that open house — was a sense of community, the feeling that we weren't alone. The sense of community remains missing from the lives of many multiracial people.

The easiest way to become a part of the multiracial community is to tap into its rich and varied culture. The hallmarks of culture — language, history, law and artistic expression — may be a challenge to identify but do exist among multiracial people as much as they do among Hungarians, the deaf and hearing impaired, or gays and lesbians.

## Language

Vocabulary is a hotly debated issue in many cultures. People of African descent, for instance, have gone from being known as "Negroes" to being "colored" then "Black" and now "African American." And the jury remains out on whether any, all or none of these is appropriate. The issues are relatively the same for multiracial people, who define themselves in a variety of ways for myriad reasons. For multiracial people, however, the debate is not only internal, among mixed-race individuals, but also external with society. While society allows those of more homogeneous African descent to select a moniker, multiracial people have the additional burden of proving they deserve to be defined at all.

But regardless of the debates within multiracial communities and society as a whole, we always have the right to define ourselves. We should learn and own the words and meanings associated with being multiracial.

We need to understand what it means to be "Creole," "Amerasian" or "quadroon." Multiracial individuals also shouldn't be afraid to use words to help others understand their social, political and historical past. As Larene LaSonde told Lise Funderberg in *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity*, "I choose to call myself mulatto. Why? There's passion in it, and you know what my politics are immediately. And if I say it in public, people know that I am prepared to defend the position."

Additionally, we should become familiar with terms such as "passing." It's essential that we understand that for single-race people, this means a person of color who wants to live as "white," while for many mulattos it also means mixed-race individuals who choose to identify only as "Black."

## History

I'd bought the Dutch-language book *Madama* in December 1994 out of a love of history. But as I read the riveting tale of Margaretha of Parma, daughter of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, I found myself more interested in her ill-fated husband, Alessandro di Medici. Not only was he the first duke of Florence, but he was the son of a pope and a Nubian slave. Even better, the book reproduced a painting of di Medici, and there was no denying his mixed-race features. That chance encounter allowed me to come face-to-face with a historical figure like me. I also came to realize that mixed-race people are the rule, not the exception.

Nearly every culture stresses the importance of history, and multiracial people should be no different. We need to become familiar with the exploits of the famous, including author Alexandre Dumas; pianist Philippa Duke Schuyler; and actress Jennifer Beals. And we should insist, as other minorities do, that this information be

shared with others through integrated curricula. To do this, we must pay close attention to everything we read and hear because the clues to a multiracial person's ancestry often are included. For instance, long before winning the Master's Open Golf Tournament, golfer Tiger Woods made very clear that he was multiracial, and that fact was noted in nearly every story about him even before he turned professional.

In order to defend our position in society, we also need to understand why historical shifts in the racial history of the United States mean that the multiracial person of the 1990s is not satisfied with a single-race identifier. It may have been appropriate at one time to declare oneself Black after being raised by a single Black mother abandoned by the white father who often was her boss. But since World War II, most multiracial Americans have had some sort of relationship with more than one parent.

The multiracial person also must be well-versed in the roles played in the development of identity by factors such as geography and the racial combination of the parents. For instance, *Black, White, Other* was heavily influenced by ideology of Civil Rights babies because Funderberg solicited essays from multiracial individuals living in the San Francisco area. Had she solicited views of Cold War babies from Indianapolis, home of the former Fort Benjamin Harrison, the complexion of the book could have been different.

## Law

In 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand a lower-court ruling that declared a Louisiana woman with barely traceable African ancestry should be defined as "Black." She was a victim of the code noir or "one drop rule." While in some states, like Louisiana, this rule was codified into law, as often as not the code noir has been enforced through social pressure. And even in cases where such laws existed, they haven't been applied equally. Laws that remain in the legal books but go unenforced, like the law that exists in some states against unmarried women kissing men with mustaches, the one drop rule is antiquated.

During this final decade of the 20th century, multiracial people who live in Ohio, Illinois, Georgia, Indiana and Michigan have won their battles against the one drop rule with laws that require multiracial identifiers on selected government forms. Private entities, such as landlords, long have been denied the right to query an applicant about race. But even multiracial individuals who don't live in states bearing these new laws need not be bound by the code noir. As a matter of conscience, many mixed-race people simply refuse to answer questions about race at all.

## Arts

Corissa Schweitz Gold, a Boulder, Colorado-based multimedia artist specializing in multiracial and interracial adoption issues, was afraid that no one understood her work. But 10-year-old Malcolm Wells II had no trouble interpreting the dual images of Schweitz Gold — one in blackface and one in whiteface — during an exhibition of her work in 1996 at the Indianapolis Art Center. Malcolm, in fact, said he was in awe that someone so closely understood his experience.

While multiraciality is a central theme in Schweitz Gold's work, it also has been addressed in the film, music, literature and fine arts of others, often through the negative "tragic mulatto" image. While the question probably won't appear in the game *Trivial Pursuit*, the song "The Yellow Rose of Texas" is about a mixed-race woman named Rose.

Most importantly, all multiracial people should understand that not only do they have the right to contribute to their culture, but they have a duty to do so. Those contributions need not be as grand as writing a book, making a movie or running for public office. They can be as simple as:

- Making certain that others understand that multiracial people have many pressing concerns beyond which box to check on a census form.
- Establishing stronger support systems within the family. Insist that parents, spouses and other single-race relatives who feel at liberty to make off-color remarks respect your feelings. Don't allow family members to underestimate the importance of being multiracial.
- Joining existing interracial family support groups in the community or establishing them where they don't exist.
- Giving up the racial anonymity that is so common among multiracial people and insist on participating in the greater public debates on race.
- Confronting a minister who from his pulpit sermonizes against interracial marriage and let him or her know how that sermon devalued your existence and created a hostile environment.
- Read about multiraciality as perceived by people who are multiracial, such as Lise Funderberg's *Black, White, Other* and the Internet magazine *Interracial Voice*.

A culture is only as strong as the individuals who belong to it.

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