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A Bill of Rights for Mixed Folks?

by Marilyn Blake Dramé

In March of 1993, i¹ attended "Moving Beyond the Racial Divide: A Conference on Multiracial People" at San Francisco State University. Maria P.P. Root² said: "We must...affirm ourselves not only as a reaction to other's perceptions but we must (also) give ourselves a Bill of Rights." I am compelled to mull over the following thirteen rights as Root presented them.

1. We have the right to change our identities from the ways our parents identify us.

Thank God, huh? Otherwise, we'd have to identify as rug rats, crumb snatchers, etc., forever. I exercised this right dramatically when i decided to pass for Black in my early twenties. I was born in my grandmother's house in Frankfurt, Germany. I was raised on military bases in Germany where my mother's German culture dominated our home and thus my identification. When i graduated from high school, my family moved stateside. It was here in the land of brotherhood-that-crowns-thy-good that there was no such thing as mixed and in accordance with the 16th commandment, one drop ruled.

I decided to pass for Black, a commitment i stuck to for 20 years. In retrospect, i recall trying way too hard and sounding way too Black (whatever that means) and using colloquialisms way too often. I never really totally fit in but i kept on plugging away because i craved the generous measure of belonging i got from my new people.

Now that i identify Mulatti and as a person of color, i feel like i fit in tolerably well everywhere, just about all of the time. I do realize that this fitting in is about my attitude and not that of others. Somewhere along the way, i discovered that fitting in isn't about becoming like others but about being comfortable with who i am.

We have the right to identify differently than do our brothers and sisters.

Applying this right to my brother and sister helps me to understand that they have the right to see themselves as they wish, the White way, the Black way, the Mulatti way, whatever. Maybe they've been ahead of me all along and just liked themselves for who they are as people — without a social-issues banner to rally behind.

3. We have the right to identify differently from how others might identify us or expect us to identify.

This one seems similar to the first one. I will get upset when someone tries to force an identity on me, but depending on who it is, i've been letting it go more and more easily. If people are willing to deny that i'm mixed when they know that one of my parents is Black and one is White, then their fight is not with me, it's with God or Nature.

4. We have the right to change our identity over a lifetime.

i am inclined to believe that our individual personal evolution requires change of us. Change is the way of life, and the experiences we garner from changes in identification can greatly enhance our growth in the direction of enlightenment.

5. We have the right to identify differently in different situations and to know we are not mixed up.

As mixed folks, what goes through our heads when we are in a group of Black folks denigrating White folks? What can we say? They are talking about our family. They are talking about us. At times i have joined in wholeheartedly, even to the point of making poisonous remarks about 'those White women who are taking our men.' It's easy to spit when one's mouth and heart are full of the bitterness of oppression and discrimination that surrounds us every day. Because i've never passed for White, i've never found myself in a situation wherein Whites are denigrating Blacks in such an outspoken manner.

i understand isolation. i feel isolated from the larger group because i am usually taken for White by Whites and so they don't see me as a person of color. i am isolated from the smaller group of Blacks because it is difficult if not impossible for them to see me as anything but Black. It has taken some time to get to where i am, feeling and being mixed but not mixed up.

6. We have the right to create a vocabulary to communicate about multiraciality because our language isn't adequate.

When i first used the term 'Mulatti' as a plural for more than one mulatta/mulatto, it felt weird and it looked weird. I wondered if people were going to think i was being too flippant. I worried that people were going to think that i shouldn't use the old Spanish mule terminology. But i do have the right to call myself anything i choose!

There is something to be said for de-stigmatizing words. I've heard gay people using terms like queer and dyke, referring to themselves and thereby legitimizing for themselves homophobic slurs. I have a t-shirt that lists some of the many words that have been assigned to us: mustee, mestiza, half-breed, quadroon, hapa, biracial, triracial, pardo, moor, haafu, mixed-breed, half-caste, tow-tone, Creole, mulatto, multiracial, doogla, sambo, santantone, mongrel, metisse, salt-n-pepa, mixed-caste, interracial, yellow, zebra, multiethnic, new people, Eurasian, moranos, Afroasian, mutt, mixed-blood, White nigger, light-skinned, rainbow, high yella, chameleon, mixed heritage, colored, chinee, wesorts, lumbee.

7. We have a right not to fractionalize ourselves in order to conform to society's notion of race.

i am not half Black, half White, not half anything. i am a Black woman and a White woman and a mixed woman. i am a whole person. i grant you that it is a deadly dangerous, horribly demeaning, ultimately destructive and highly effective notion in so far as the perpetuation of the notion of White supremacy is concerned, but i believe that the concept of race is a myth.

Here is an interesting example from the Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. 6, pg. 57, 1945 edition: "Mankind, according to most authorities, includes three primary divisions or races which are difficult to delimit as the breed of dog.... The characteristic which seems to be most constant and useful in the classification of man is the hair, which marks off three primary races: Cymotrichi (wavy-haired, Caucasian); Leiotrichi (smooth-haired, Mongolian); Ulotrichi (woolly-haired, negro) [yes, they capitalized the first two races and lower-cased the Negro consistently throughout the text].... The division into these three races is now generally accepted. Apart from the hair, the physical characteristics of each of the races vary so greatly that their definition is difficult."

8. We have the right to have loyalties and identification with more than one ethnic group.

And if we are fortunate enough to know and love both our mommies and our daddies, then we can't help but have loyalties and identification with their ethnic groups. We can be conscious and proactive about our loyalties and ID.

When i'm doing my bias-busting work with groups that are interested in examining and deconstructing the notions and systems of bias (racism, sexism, etc.) that exist in our culture, i always feel my mixedness, my mixed feelings. i feel some identification with the shame of the victim and the guilt of the oppressor — the confusion, helplessness, bitterness, pain, anger, resentment and rage on all sides.

Certainly, i've enjoyed the light/White skin privilege and socalled 'good hair' and 'good features' all my life, unconsciously before and increasingly and uncomfortably consciously now. My mother's sincere and abiding love for her husband and her children did not magically erase the notion of superiority that White supremacy teaches. Like my Black father, being born a person of color does not prevent me from internalizing the guidelines for judging self and others according to racist values.

The more bias-busting work i do, the more my racist values surface. Because i am a person of color, i have internalized racism and like all people of color, i have used racism against others and against myself. That's just the way it works. i'm peeling away the layers of the onion of racism, and i cry. If i don't do the work in my little corner of the world, then it will just get done that much slower. The effort of striving for equity, being loyal and identifying with all of one's ethnicities, helps to keep one on balance. Loyalty to both sides means that you don't beat yourself up nonstop for having racist feelings and you don't justify conscious perpetuation of racism that springs from internalized racism. Identification with both sides keeps me from accepting the role of bridge all the time. i am both sides: not just the middle ground, not just the joining factor.

9. We have the right not to want to fit in exactly.

No one fits in exactly anyway. There is always something that we withhold from people, at work, in social groups, even in close personal relationships. That withholding prevents us from fitting in exactly but it also keeps us safe, protected from the judgment and possible rejection of others.

As a mixed person, i'm glad to have it stated that i have the right not to fit in exactly, because no matter how tolerably well i've learned to fit in, i know that there is no place for me in the US or anywhere else that i know of, where i fit in exactly. That is why we have wonder outlets like Interracial Voice!³ Every cloud has a silver lining, right?

10. We have the right not to be responsible for people's discomfort with our presence.

This one has been rough for me and i'm glad she articulated it. It is part of the etiquette woven into the fabric of internalized racism to ensure that we feel uncomfortable with our differentness. Historically, Blacks have always had the responsibility of looking down, stepping down, staying down so that Whites wouldn't become frightened. All people of color have traditionally had to 'become White' in order to succeed even marginally in the White-dominated power structure.

i remember once when a man i worked with told me a 'nigger' joke, not realizing that i was not White like him. i stood there in stunned silence not hearing a word he said. When he finished, i spoke with measured breath, 'You know i'm Black.' Ernie threw his head back and laughed heartily, thinking that i was pulling his leg. i remained calm but very serious and assured him that i was indeed Black. He went into 'the squint,' scrutinizing my face. He was completely perplexed. 'Well, what country are you from?' he queried tentatively, hopelessly confused. i could see that he wasn't convinced. His eyes told him that he was right, but my eyes told him he'd made a seriously wrong turn. i told him i was American but that i was born in Germany and that my mom was German.

'Well, where's your dad from?' Ernie persisted, cocking his head to the side, cocker-spaniel style. "He's from New Jersey,"

11. We have the right not to justify our existence.

I no longer explain that my parents are consenting adults. I am not the product of the heritage of the White master raping the Black slave. We Mulatti are not a mistake.

12. We have the right not to justify our ethnic legitimacy.

I am mixed. I exist. Therefore mixed exists.

13. We have the right not to engage in racially-limited partnerships and friendships.

It is interesting that when i identified exclusively as Black the sexual and racial taboo against intermixing ruled my choices in romantic relationships with men absolutely, but no such taboos influenced my choices in women friends.

When they asked
if
I was Black or White
or what,
I said:
I was Black and
White
and what
difference
did it make to them.

and they said:
did I have the answers
to the math
problems?
And
I had the answers.4

- ¹ In case you are wondering, I like to use the lower case "i" rather than the upper case "I" when referring to myself, because I can't figure out why "i" should be more important than she, her, it or them.
- ² Editor of the anthology Racially Mixed People in America, Sage Publication, 2455 Teller Road, Newbury Park, CA 91320.
- ³ Interracial Voice, PO Box 560185, College Point, NY, NY 11356-0185
- ⁴ All the Colors of the Race, by Arnold Adoff, Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, New York, 1982