

## Preface

The multiracial movement drew me in for reasons outside personal experience, as the term is typically used. Yet personal experience pulled me toward it nonetheless. My grandfather was born just twenty-one years after the Supreme Court's infamous ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which sanctioned preexisting Jim Crow laws in his home state and paved the way for new ones beyond it. That was one connection. There was no ambiguity about where Alfromia Lewis fit into the law's black-and-white categories. Yet here was a group of people claiming the right to change their racial identities over time, the right to claim more than one race, and perhaps the right to escape from racial minority status altogether. That struck another chord. The struggles of earlier generations for first-class citizenship and equal rights bequeathed to mine powerful messages such as "I AM Somebody" and "black and proud—say it loud." They handed down the most precious of gifts: the demise of formal Jim Crow and a sense of dignity in carving the space to define oneself. I was born in Oakland, in the late 1960s, an environment that generated abundant proof that black was beautiful, powerful, and eclectic. All the while, through my parents and their idiosyncratic circle of friends and acquaintances in my increasingly international hometown, I learned from childhood to move between many worlds.

The Oakland Adult Day School where my mother, Dorothy Edwards, taught English as a second language until I was twelve brought to life the otherwise abstract notion of demographic change. In the wake of the Vietnam War, a trickle of affluent, French-speaking Vietnamese appeared in her classes, eventually followed by scores of refugees from across Southeast Asia. Iranian

students enrolled after the fall of the Shah. Political upheaval in Guatemala and El Salvador brought students from these countries into her classroom and our lives. New arrivals, joining the more stable flow of Mexicans, sometimes made for overnight changes in the student body. The students and their stories spurred my interest in politics and further expanded my worldview.

My upbringing was such that I could later appreciate how people might find that monoracial categories did not fit their multiracial reality. Multiracial advocates' desire for latitude in self-identification was, on one hand, unobjectionable and even familiar. Freedom of expression and of association were inextricable from the kind of black pride that I had grown up with from childhood. On the other hand, using civil rights victories and symbolism, multiracial activists seemed to seek a flexibility that eludes most blacks. And the very notion of "multiracial recognition" had the potential to undermine federal civil rights enforcement efforts, already under considerable attack from other corners. Thus, I began a long conversation with multiracial activists, who claimed that their recognition could lessen racial polarization by enabling Americans to think differently, and more humanely, across racial boundaries.

This book explains how a social movement with powerful opponents, little money, and few active supporters could spark a series of unprecedented changes in the way Americans measure race. The new message from the government—reaching far and wide, through the promulgation of census data—is that race can be multiple and flexible; it need not be singular or rigid. If this drives a wedge into the larger debate about the changing meaning of race and the measure of progress, as argued in the book, then, contrary to conventional wisdom, the implications for civil rights thought and action are significant. Now that it has been institutionalized in the federal statistical system and in a number of states, the old but newly vindicated notion of racial mixture is not likely to go away. It further complicates matters that there is something in the multiracial idea that most of us want to hear. The window that this issue opens onto the civil rights past, present, and future is the subject of this book.

I witnessed many of the events described here firsthand, and I cannot thank the activists enough. I pursued these people for years and—a wonder to me still—they preserved a sense of humor about

it. I could not have written this book without them. During the height of movement activity and beyond, I followed them to their conferences, trailed them at their solidarity marches, visited their homes, and feasted at their countless cookouts. I have had some of the most memorable race conversations of my life with multiracial activists. I am especially grateful to Nancy Brown, Charles Byrd, Reg Daniel, Edwin Darden, Ramona Douglass, Levonne Gaddy, Harold Gates, Susan Graham, Matt Kelley, Sarah Ross, and Ruth White.

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My family has been an ongoing source of solace and wisdom. My husband, Mingus Mapps, put up with years of census minutiae that surely would have brought an average man to the brink. He often helped me think through ideas, he always encouraged me to tell it like it is, and he has done so much more. My brother, Daniel Williams, offered refreshing perspectives and comic relief by way of thoughtful phone calls. Thanks to my aunts and uncles for all that they have taught me: Brad and Kaye Collins, Dean Collins, Ray Collins, Tori Collins, Jean and Emmett Richardson, Ethel and Jerry Williams, Norris Williams, Elizabeth (Cookie) Williams, and Glenn Williams. Thanks to Jack Williams. Thanks to Kenny Williams. My grandparents—Geraldine Collins, Juanita and Alfornia Lewis, and E. C. Williams—related spectacularly sad stories, screamingly funny accounts, and sundry incidents all the more remarkable because they regarded them as mundane. Everybody had an opinion. My life and my work have grown richer as a result. Most of all, I thank my parents, Dorothy and Terry Edwards, who taught me by example how to move between many worlds.