

Article

# Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity

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**Abstract:** This article, “Post What? The Liminality of Multi-Racial Identity,” argues that the successes and failures of 21st-century satire reveal the myth of post-raciality while simultaneously dismissing racial essentialism. I focus on three critical moments: the commercial success of Mat Johnson’s *Loving Day*, a text and forthcoming television show that examines the shifting self-identities of mixed-race individuals; the inability of a potential love interest on the television series, *Louie*, to accept a black woman as the ex-wife of the titular protagonist’s phenotypically white daughters; and Barack Obama’s self-designation as “black” on the census shortly after his election. I argue that the widespread reach of these instances, coupled with audience engagement and response, underscores the ways that the public realm frames a contemporary understanding of race as both meaningful and absurd.

**Keywords:** multi-racial; identity; Barack Obama; popular culture; critical race studies; humor studies; twenty-first-century studies

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## 1. Introduction: The Personal is Public?

“The people whose appearance matches the identity they project, they have a place in society that they fit into with minimal cramping. But here, standing next to us, is everyone else. The human equivalent of mismatched socks. The people whose racial appearance fails to mirror the ethnicity of their inner spirit.”  
Mat Johnson, *Loving Day* ([1], p. 81)

“Is there a point to recognizing a person of color *as* a person of color, as black, Asian, Latino, Native American, biracial, even multiracial? Or is the point to ‘forget’ or disregard that feature of identity insofar as a just society is possible only when we move beyond race consciousness, as many proponents of postracialism suggest?”  
Ki Joo (KC) Choi, “Should Race Matter?” ([2], p. 79)

“I would have to...investigate Bill’s dancing abilities...before I accurately judge whether he was in fact a brother.”  
Barack Obama, on Bill Clinton during the South Carolina Primary [3]

A brief personal anecdote may serve here to elucidate the real-world applicability of humor and why one of the most significant questions engaging the intersection of critical race studies and comedy may be that of what happens, as Dave Chappelle frames it, “when keeping it real goes wrong.” Many years ago, I went with a group of friends to see up-and-coming comedian Aziz Ansari perform stand up in Atlanta, Georgia [4]. While I was under the impression I would be at this event with a small group of close friends, the gathering grew, as these things often do, until I was surrounded by a number of people I did not know. During the show, Ansari was simultaneously hilarious and thoughtful, displaying his characteristic self-deprecation. He performed one particularly striking piece where he read off a number of antiquated and less common racial slurs and then revealed their

peculiar definitions. Ansari, an Indian American who grew up in South Carolina, explicitly stated he wanted to demonstrate the seeming arbitrariness of racism by showing the ludicrousness of these terms upon critical consideration, while highlighting the power they retain in their framing *as* slurs. The biggest laugh was drawn from the phrase “touch of the tar brush”, meaning a person with distant African ancestry who may or may not appear physically to have any. I laughed and cringed, like the rest of the audience, and appreciated Ansari’s use of his platform. Leaving the venue, the ever-larger group split into cars to caravan out for food and drinks. Somehow, I ended in a car with a group of friends-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, a few white men in their mid-twenties—the same age as me, at the time. We exchanged polite introductions and began to talk about the show. As quickly as the conversation began, the driver and his cohorts dove into a discussion of racial slurs and the hilarity of their use, interjecting the phrase “touch of the tar brush” at random intervals and wondering aloud if passersby had a “touch of the tar brush.” These men were not only laughing at the wrong part of the joke but had unknowingly become its punch line. Outnumbered and feeling ill at ease—and, as a woman of color, feeling quite sincerely threatened and under attack—I wondered if I had been rendered invisible or merely irrelevant to them. I remained silent and tried to make myself momentarily smaller than they had. I left the group shortly after I got out of the car, hoping my absence would speak for me, but sure it would not.

I have often thought back on the implications of this day—the joy evoked by the show so quickly tempered and then erased by the unexpected trauma and fear I felt immediately following. What strikes me now, years later, is the way that Ansari’s framework was immaterial to the conversation the members of his audience wanted to have. Ansari could not have been more explicit in his articulation or his performance. He overtly stated his meaning and explained his intention with precision—and, indeed, even his very existence as a person of color was tacitly indicated to explain his investment in the conversation and its framing. Yet these members of his audience chose to disregard his intention in favor of the reductive—the show became an opportunity for these audience members to utter slurs without guilt and without culpability.

The stakes of both public and private articulations and performances of race more broadly can be seen clearly through further consideration of this moment. Although Ansari is not defined as immediately as a “race comic”, compared with Dave Chappelle or Chris Rock, much of his joke-telling is derived from a keen understanding of what it means to have your body racialized and essentialized as you negotiate your place in society—his brown skin, diminutive frame, his seemingly incongruent South Carolina adolescence, and the expectations of society at large as they view him [5]. Jonathan P. Rossing describes this as a sense of parrhesia—speaking candidly and without apology—in comedy. He explains:

Major revisions to dominant knowledge require insights from those outside of dominant political culture whose experiential truths disrupt the status quo and challenge dominant knowledge and conventions. Critical race humor provides a pathway to parrhesia for speakers who are underpowered in relation to their audience. Such humor empowers marginalized critics to problematize shared and sacred truths, and it provides opportunities to undermine oppressive forces that stifle justice ([6], p. 23).

Thus, this potentially deliberate misunderstanding on the part of these viewers is more than just a failed joke or a punchline falling flat. If the point of this humor is to empower the marginalized, then, when these jokes fail, it is not only the underpowered comedian who suffers, but the underpowered members of his or her audience as well. These moments reinforce social interactions, feelings of safety and of self-worth, and the reification of limited, easily recalled racial preconceptions. For this reason, perhaps even more than in years past, racial humor—and, indeed, multiple forms of racial performance and racial choice—is especially in need of greater analysis as a conscious and deliberate effort to examine not only the play of the satirical but of the dynamic literary reach and applicability of the field more broadly. For this reason, I want to expand on the reception of racialized topics outside

of academia and the way their articulation in the popular realm influences our public understandings of race in the twenty-first century.

## 2. Loving Day, Louie, and the Fallacy of the Post-Racial

Mat Johnson's 2015 novel, *Loving Day*, addresses issue of racial malleability and fluidity through a close examination of identity possibilities through the frame of multi-raciality. This text works well in consideration of future directions of African American literature not only because of its newness but also because of the excitement with which it was met. While the novel is unapologetically dense, cerebral, and metanarrative, it was met with both critical and popular anticipation and acclaim, with positive reviews in *The New York Times*, in *Washington Post*, and on NPR. Indeed, talks to develop the novel into a Showtime television series are currently in the works, highlighting its public reception. This begs the question: what is it about the ideas of racial confusion, identity ambiguity, and multi-raciality that is so engaged in the twenty-first century? It may be a desire to tacitly acknowledge the unfulfilled promise of the *post-racial*. In *Loving Day*, the protagonist, Warren Duffy, a thinly veiled racial stand-in for Johnson himself, works to negotiate the shifting parameters of race in the 21st century—he looks phenotypically white and, like Johnson himself and many of Johnson's other protagonists, chooses to identify as African American. As a result of this seeming incongruity, Warren is forced to examine the practicality of racial performance and performativity, as his self-identity is in stark contrast to his other-identified self. In this sense, multiple possibilities of racial identity are highlighted—Johnson forwards an argument that the binary is an insufficient frame because it is able to be traversed; now, the binary is inadequate because a person can accept a binary definition of race that exists irrespective of phenotype while also inhabiting multiple positions outside of the binary simultaneously. Duffy explains upon arriving in Philadelphia:

I'm not white, but I can feel the eyes of the few people outside on me, people who must think that I am, because I look white, and as such what the hell am I doing here? This disconnect in my racial projection is one of the things I hate. It goes in a subcategory I call "America," which has another subheading called "Philly." I hate that because I know I'm black. My mother was black—that counts, no matter how pale and Irish my father was. So I shall not be rebuked. I will not be rejected. I want to run but I refuse to be run off ([1], p. 4).

Once again, it appears initially that credence is given to hypodescent. Warren identifies himself as black because his mother is black, and "that counts", in his estimation. Yet even here, there seems to be a distinction between hypodescent as *law* and hypodescent as chosen parameter. The twenty-first century satirical impulse is marked by the reappropriation of negative tropes of blackness—a blurring of the line between pride and shame, and an active effort to reinscribe harmful stereotypes with a sense of autonomy and power—but here we see even the reappropriation of the *very terms* meant to define and prescribe black identity. This notion expands upon former NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White's assertion in the early twentieth century that he "considers" himself black and turns blackness into something that is not only chosen, but is nearly aspirational. In this sense, blackness is definable by genetics—by having a phenotypically identifiable black relative. However, it is also defined in its stark defiance of the gaze—by refusing another-assigned racial categorization. In this sense, while whiteness is still assumed and normalized, blackness refuses to be made abject even as it works to announce itself within a racialized hierarchy. As a result, blackness is rendered performative, but importantly it is here still only appropriately performative within the context of genetics.

Warren explains the subtlety of his own performance when he suspects his racial identity is either in question or unclear. He describes his voice:

The words don't really matter. What I'm really doing is letting my black voice come out, to compensate for my ambiguous appearance. Let the bass take over my tongue. Let the South of Mom's ancestry inform the rhythm of my words in a way few white men could pull off. It's conscious but not unnatural—I sometimes revert to this native tongue even

when I have nothing to prove... What I'm saying is, *I'm black too*. What I'm saying is that he can relax around me, because I'm on his side. That he doesn't have to worry I'm going to make some random racist statement that will stab him when he's unguarded, or be offended when he makes some racist comment of his own. People aren't social, they're tribal. Race doesn't exist, but tribes are fucking real. What am I saying? *I'm on Team Blackie*. And I can see in the slight relaxing that he's willing to accept my self-definition, at least tentatively, pending further investigation ([1], pp. 17–18).

This is linked into the tradition of passing narratives, to be sure, but Johnson puts a new spin on it, which illuminates the reasons why some efforts at passing are accepted while others are soundly rebuffed. What can be presumed in this element of the “tribal” in passing efforts? Is it an affinity that cannot be reduced to the mere happenstance of DNA? That the alliance must be active in specific ways? In Warren's estimation, the tribal connection is marked by the *choosing*—by finding some connectivity with the other members outside of what is easily identifiable to outsiders. Michele Elam elaborates on this idea in *The Souls of Mixed Folk* when she writes,

If for the select few perceived as racially ambiguous by a dominant culture, race does involve a heightened ability to make situational choices about one's racial identity, then by “choice” we must not merely mean a willingness to buy into, literally, the commercialization of race affects; that is, “choosing” race, one hopes, ought not to translate into, for example, simply purchasing hip-hop wear ([7], p. 49).

Elam troubles the idea of choosing alone by eschewing choice as mere performance or accoutrements. This connection then, as Warren notes, may be better marked by a sense of allegiance and protection—the listener needs to know, as Warren posits, that he has shared experiences and understands the fullness of black identity. Warren must demonstrate a careful articulation of blackness, rather than mere fascination with its accoutrements. In fact, his use of the bass that, at least in his description, already exists as a part of his vocal repertoire highlights this idea that it is not something to be added on—he is not “talking black”; he is talking and he is, in fact, genetically and tribally black [8]. This specific notion of the tribal works to redefine blackness: it refuses ideas of blackness as either abject or as racial repository simultaneously. What this means then is that blackness is not viewed as the last frontier of racial identity. Johnson depicts blackness as a desirable identity with benefits both tangible and implied. Blackness is not, in this way, a designation inescapable through an unlucky genetic lottery or some sense of phenotypic certainty. Similarly, Johnson also refuses the popular pathologizing of blackness—and black *people*—as always already accepting of interlocutors. As seen in the Rachel Dolezal case, a story that quite fascinatingly coincided in the media with the publication of *Loving Day*, blackness does not immediately absorb any and all who claimed affiliation. Instead, Johnson is deliberate in his articulation that black identity takes effort. In this rather subtle way, he refuses the post-racial idea that race does not matter in favor of an argument where race matters greatly, but its existence is marked by a new degree of porosity.

Warren's already complicated existence is further complicated through the revelation that he has a newly discovered teenage daughter, Tal, who was raised Jewish, unaware of her mixed-race background. Her arrival in his life, along with the acquisition of his father's old, decaying house in Philadelphia, serves as impetus for his closer examination of race—both his own and that of those around him. His daughter's initial outright resistance to any understanding of herself as black leads him to attempt to enroll her in an Afrocentric school in the area. When this is proven a poor match, he and Tal become members of *Melange*, a school and community for individuals who identify as multi-racial, and particularly those whose phenotype seems not to represent their personal racial identity. Throughout the narrative Warren vacillates between his feelings about the need for inclusion and his concerns that even a classification as multi-racial does not quite explain his identity in satisfactory ways. One of the leaders of the group, Sunita, senses his reluctance and empathizes. Sunita offers,

Okay, here's the secret. It's not really a secret, but I'll frame it to you as one. The same people who despise you for identifying as mixed? Those are the same people who, when you do identify as black, despise you for not being black enough. And there's nothing you can actually do to be black enough, for them. Because it's not really how you act that they despise. It's you. Your very existence ([1], p. 123).

In this moment, the fraught territory of identity is made explicit and the fallacy of the post-racial mythology is apparent. If the post-racial manifests in an idea that race is meaningless and racial identification is somehow superfluous, then this acute feeling of placelessness, of physicality as problematic and problematized—described by Johnson throughout *Loving Day* as an intrinsic part of the multiracial experience—disproves the utopia that refusing race is implied to create. Instead of being embraced by a post-racial society that views mixed identity as an admirable endgame [9], Johnson describes a society that, even as it asserts the presumed value of expanding traditional racial parameters still views racial malleability askance and with great hesitation. It may be, then, that even in the claims that race may no longer matter—or that it does not matter in the ways that it used to matter—there is still a desire for the traditional and comforting racial categories, for the reification of that racial hierarchy. Those individuals whose bodies are viewed as in opposition to this idea are necessarily alienated and suffer erasure. They become aberrations of the system even outside of their identification because they are outliers to the binary line. The existence of mixed-race people, particularly those who seem racially ambiguous or those who identify as other than their phenotypic portrayal, distorts an understanding of identity as simplistic and, even more importantly, *obvious*, that is, part of the national consciousness. Despite claims to the contrary, the United States does indeed not only use race as shorthand for class and mobility but is profoundly desirous of race as it is the frame within which we understand identity. In it resides a focus that deeply shapes our understanding of the self as defined in opposition to the other.

What is interesting here is not simply that Johnson so rightly identifies the national hypocrisy of our insistent articulation of the post-racial as a goal of enlightenment, but that he places it in the context of multi-racial self-identification in the twenty-first century and very real concerns surrounding an affinity toward blackness, or its rejection. The contemporary moment is greatly concerned with the stakes of literature and cultural production—not, as Kenneth Warren seems to posit in *What Was African American Literature*, because the stakes have shifted in such a way to render the field unnecessary in some regard, but because, as the parameters of a racially identified field shift, our connection to the stakes must likewise expand to accept the wide breadth of possibilities. Johnson makes this explicit in the nuanced characterizations he provides, especially of the mixed-raced individuals populating *Loving Day's* Philadelphia. Sunita and the Melange community could have easily veered into stereotypes of either a mythologized racial utopia or a cautionary tale depicting the harm that can be caused when race is unacknowledged or only addressed in superficial ways, but Johnson's interest here is much more expansive. Through Sunita, readers encounter an understanding of race that dwells in the potentials. For Sunita, there is necessity in examining multiple spaces of racial identification—your ability to choose your identity while still acutely understanding the historical context of race in the United States. Toward the end of the novel, her own articulations of identity become even more nuanced as she continues to grapple with the real-life applications. She argues,

If these Oreos are trying to change things so that they're not really black, how does that help anyone besides themselves? We've got black boys being used for target practice by white cops out there, we've got a prison system overflowing with victims of white judgment. We have a crisis. Right now. Not in the eighteenth century, not in the civil rights era, but right now. How does them quitting blackness help the Trayvon Martins out there? How does it help the Michael Browns? The Renisha McBrides, and all the black women out there struggling to hold it down? How does running away from blackness not make that worse? ([1], p. 239).

This statement is a useful way to frame the possibilities of distinction between the post-soul [10]—a period following the Civil Rights Movement and *de jure* gestures toward equality—which seems to see value in the acknowledgement of racial difference and race as connected to present historicity, and the post-racial, which, at least as it is used popularly, does not. The opportunity for self-identification may be worthwhile, but only insofar as it provides a still-communal sense of autonomy and meaning—the *tribal* designation that Johnson elucidates. That is to say, unequivocally, that race does matter—racialization and racism are real and serve particular purposes within an identity system in the United States. Yet this does not imply an invalidation of multi-raciality. Instead, it simply means that an acknowledgement of multi-raciality should not be taken as some indicator that the post-racial has taken hold. The multi-racial, in the estimation, instead may indicate that race *does* very much exist, and that it is impossible to be *post*-race. Using the post-racial in an effort to opt out of race because of fears surrounding the trauma of racism is not only disingenuous but ineffective. Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers note in *The Preacher and the Politician*, “Placed in historical context, ‘postracial’ theories do not enable racialized peoples to transcend race; on the contrary, they involve the deployment of new terminology that reinscribes old racial binaries of white and nonwhite. The increasingly popular ‘postracial’ theories in effect proclaim whiteness as normative” ([11], p. 8). In this sense, then, the post-racial continues to reify the racial hierarchy as it implies the normative status of whiteness. Indeed, Johnson solidifies this meaning by demonstrating that an uncritical investment in the performative aspects of the post-racial—that these individuals touting the advantage of post-raciality are actually those who feel they would benefit from disavowing blackness, or what they presume black performativity entails, for the sake of convenience.

Indeed, even as it is insistently evoked in the media, in recent years, the post-racial has been rendered suspect if not ridiculous in surprising ways. One critically underanalyzed example is the FX series, *Louie*, written by stand-up comedian and writer Louis C.K. and loosely based on his life, which ostensibly delves into the idea of the post-racial in its casting procedures. While *Louie* itself may not initially seem to fit within the broadening parameters of ethnic or mixed-race literary and cultural studies, the show is worth a closer examination as Louis C.K. himself has a strong association with the field—aside from his own interesting cultural background, he is a frequent collaborator with Chris Rock and Wanda Sykes, and a former writer for *The Chris Rock Show* as well as the writer and director of the cult film, *Pootie Tang* [12]. *Louie* follows the titular character, a moderately successful stand-up comic, and his awkward encounters as a well-intentioned ne’er-do-well in New York City. Important for this analysis, however, is his relationship with his daughters and ex-wife. Although his daughters, introduced in the first season of the series, are blonde, fair-skinned actresses, the actress who played his ex-wife beginning in season three is revealed to be African American. In fact, *revealed* may be too active an assertion—his ex-wife was suddenly present as a black woman and this fact of interraciality was never addressed. No explanation was given, and no character ever discussed this apparent incongruence. There was no episode about race, no special conversation about the meaning of his daughters’ existence as white-presenting individuals raised by a black woman, and no surprise on the part of any other characters. It seems that this intentional silence is not necessarily meant to depict a post-racial utopia but instead to indicate that race was simply a non-factor in this realm [13]. Louis C.K. explained in interviews that he trusted his audience to accept the casting decision without any real hesitation or discomfort, and, by and large, he was correct—audiences found Susan Kelechi Watson’s portrayal of Janet to be compelling, and response was largely positive to this race neutrality. All of this changed, however, in June 2014, when race was abruptly engaged by a love interest after meeting Janet for the first time. The conversation is worth including in its entirety:

Pamela: How is your ex-wife black?

Louie: What, I can’t marry a black woman?

Pamela: You can marry a green elephant. The question is, how the hell is she the mother of those almost-translucent white girls of yours?

Louie: Oh, her mom is white.

Pamela: Oh, well, then, her mom must have had those kids, because Janet is not their mom.

Louie: Yes...yes, she is.

Pamela: Did you see them being born? Did you see those little white babies come out of her juicy black pussy? Because I think she stole them [14].

There is much to unpack in this loaded moment. The willingness to allow Louie a marriage to a green elephant over a phenotypically black woman having phenotypically white children is troubling and seems consistent with the historical reduction of black femininity to the animalistic, namely, that of course Louie could marry a black woman as easily as a (fictional) green elephant, as the exchange rate is equal in these two possibilities. Similarly, the vulgar and dehumanizing reduction of Janet to slurs of genitalia speaks to the overt sexualization of the black female body. Even in maternity, even in the literal act of birthing, Janet is only acknowledged through active sexuality. Finally, of course, the accusation of theft—even as, in Pamela’s articulation, it is meant to be received as a *joke*—is itself rife with racist implications about blackness and criminality and seems to imply a racial hierarchy in which these “white” children her body is assumed incapable of producing may be inherently worth stealing. This is such a stark tonal shift from the usual treatment of race in *Louie* which consists primarily of avoiding the subject or a rather progressive engagement in which people of color are actively present in New York City and in Louie’s life, but racial difference holds much less salience than distinctions of class, gender, sexuality, or culture. Yet here, Pamela’s shock at this racial difference is clear and articulated in disturbingly blunt and racialized—and at times simply *racist*—terms. In fact, Pamela’s disbelief is couched specifically in the feigned idea that she is not surprised to learn Louie’s ex-wife is black, but instead that the mother of these girls is. Here, once again, we see the acute sense of racial panic that emerges when the rules of genetics result in ambiguity or a sense of confusion, when the procreative reality exists outside the parameters of phenotypic expectations. Indeed, while it might be unlikely for this woman to be the biological mother of these children, it is not *impossible*. Such is the nature of race in the United States. Moreover, while Louie does reassert Janet’s motherhood, when Pamela refuses to accept this reality, he falls into awkward, uncomfortable silence.

What is troubling here is that this scene is played merely for laughs—Pamela says what, presumably, the audience has been wondering for years; Louie attempts to stand up to her and is ultimately too insecure to do so. As a result, the implications of this scene are considerably damaging, especially because they are shockingly far afield from the racial content of the show until this moment. Ross Scarano succinctly described the disturbing scene, writing for *Complex* online, “But last night, after nearly two complete seasons without any (unnecessary) explanation, he explained Janet. Prodded by Pamela, Louie explained that Janet is biracial, that her mother is white. And for what? So that Pamela could use the phrase ‘juicy black pussy’? It was a deeply disappointing moment from a show I expect better of” [15]. Indeed, this scene is grotesque in its oversimplification of race and procreation, and it is especially troubling coming from Louis C.K. In a series that works against an idea of a “lowest common denominator” as a necessity in joke-telling, this particular moment is a disconcerting reminder of the racialization within the idea of post-raciality—where whiteness is a proven normative and post-race presumes clear racial performativity and a limited expectation of race as on a binary. This could have offered a teachable moment on the nuances of race, or phenotypes, or even genetics, but instead the joke is shallow and any meaning is lost outside of Pamela as outrageous (but learning nothing) and Louie as reticent in her presence. Even from a solely artistic standpoint, this seems to waste a subtle and intriguing storyline that had been building well for four seasons on an easy joke that adds nothing to character development and does nothing to further the plot. As previously mentioned, Louis C.K. does not address race in substantive ways in *Louie*, but in his stand-up he works to address race from an actively anti-racist perspective. Imperfect as his material may be, his articulation of racial issues is meant to point out its ridiculousness in contemporary society. Moreover, and importantly, Louis C.K., although phenotypically white, with red hair and freckles, is actually of mixed ancestry—his father is Mexican and his first language is Spanish. He has sensitively addressed the preconceptions concerning race and appearance in the frame of his personal experiences to Tavis Smiley, saying, “But

because of the way that I look, I wouldn't be pegged as a Mexican, which is interesting because I'm more Mexican than a lot of people that are known as Mexicans, you know...Also, people experience Mexicans as that brown guy that comes over and works in my house, or whatever it is. They don't realize that they're surrounded by millions of white Mexicans..." [16]. His *Louie* doppelgänger is white—although occasionally reference is made to his ethnic heritage as being vague or unclear—and, as a “white” person with non-white ancestry in his immediate family, he is aware of the nuances of race and self-categorization. As a result, the cavalier treatment in *Louie* as space for an easy joke is especially disheartening.

Prior to this offensive moment in the series, in an interview with late-night host Jimmy Kimmel in 2012, Louis C.K. explained Janet saying, “If the character works for the show, I don't care about the race.” Yet even in this moment, he immediately added, “When a black woman tells you to get a job, it's just more...” before trailing off and laughing [17]. This articulation seems to typify the post-racial imagination, an impulse against which the post-soul agitates. Here, Louis C.K. seems unable to disabuse himself of the notion of intrinsic characteristics of black womanhood. In describing a black woman's demands as “more”—even as he finds it difficult to grasp the appropriate adjective—he conjures those stereotypical traits of sassiness, argumentativeness, and even emasculation and places an imagined trope of the black woman in conflict with broader *normal* womanhood. Blackness is once again pathologized, even as he disavows the significance of race in his casting these roles in the same breath. The post-soul, as seen in Johnson's biting critique of post-race, asserts itself in the possibilities of identity without expressing disbelief about the ways race has a real impact on the lives of racialized individuals. The post-racial, like the post-black in its insistent disavowal of racial import, often slips accidentally or otherwise back into racial essentialism. While Louis C.K. may understand the repercussions of these slippages, he is not including them in the fictionalized account of his life. In fact, it becomes a hugely uncomfortable missed opportunity for viewers as Pamela learns no lesson, retains the power in the dynamic that so marks their relationship, and Louie is made to feel that his discomfort is unjustified—a signifier of his own awkwardness rather than justifiable unease with racialized language about his ex-wife and, ultimately, his own children.

### 3. Obama and Racial (Mis)Directions

Even outside of the realm of entertainment, there is a popular pre-occupation with mixed-race-ness and identification and how it frames the lived experiences of people of color. In this sense, perhaps the greatest examples for mixed-race identity formation and its application in the twenty-first century have been spurred on by the election of Barack Obama—not merely his reception as a candidate and then two-term president, but in the ways he himself has struggled to define himself in the context of a national understanding of blackness that evolves and stays the same. The first few months of his term were marked by this seeming conflict of personal identity and other-determined identity, especially his self-designation as black on the census in April 2009. When Obama filled out the census form, the nation awaited what this newly elected president would select—his campaign rhetoric seemed to embrace the wide possibilities of racial identity, naming himself as black while still acknowledging the legitimacy of his existence as the son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas. Yet his decision to check “black” only was met with criticism and disappointment from some supporters. Elizabeth Chang wrote for *Washington Post*, “Obama, who has also referred to himself as a ‘mutt’, made a big deal during the 2008 campaign of being able to relate to Hawaiians and Midwesterners, Harvard grads and salespeople, blacks, whites, Latinos, whatever—precisely because of his ‘unconventional’ background and multicultural exposure. On the census, however, he has effectively said that, when it counts, he is black” [18]. Yet this assertion seems an oversimplification of the challenge of identity Obama faced and seems to discount the both/and that Obama has always articulated in his own self-formation in favor of an either/or. While Chang expresses a concern that Obama “does not acknowledge half of his heritage, or, more basically, the mother and grandparents who raised him, or even his commonality with his sister, who is also biracial, though with a different mix” [18], she conflates his choice of census

label—itself a fraught and limited forum to address identity formation—with his repeated personal articulation of self. In *Still a House Divided*, Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith imagine Obama's potential motivations:

Filling out his form quickly while cameras clicked, Obama marked only one box, 'Black, African Am., or Negro' (the last term reportedly maintained due to the Census Bureau's perception of the preferences of older blacks). The president may have done so out of a strong sense of self-identification; or because he knew that if he checked that box at all, he would be counted as 'Black' for most federal administrative purposes; or because he believed that many in his political base would be offended if he identified otherwise. He may have done so with some misgivings or, as his press secretary Robert Gibbs implied, without hesitation. But in any case, as a political figure who has faced suspicions about being both 'not black enough' and 'too black,' Obama must have been aware of how the choice before him had been shaped by the politics of today's racial alliances ([19], pp. 203–4).

Indeed, it is Obama's tenuous identity as both the first black president and a president who, some critics claimed, was only elected because his blackness was deemed unthreatening in particular ways that perhaps necessitated his choice. By choosing to articulate his blackness in this *official* capacity, Obama subscribed to the traditional explication of race with the United States—the fact of an immediate ancestor of African descent, and indeed, his *father*, seems to render the question of authenticity moot. Yet even more than this, Obama is not only subscribing to a racial tradition but he is prescribing the choosing of a racial categorization based on phenotype that simultaneously refuses to discount the actual nuances of racial identity. It is not then, as Chang asserts, that, "[i]f the most powerful person in this country says that because society thinks he looks black, he is black, [which] sends a message that biracial children have to identify with the side they most resemble" [18]. Instead, it places the idea of biraciality and multi-raciality within the frame of historicity. For this exact reason, Chang's oversimplification is dangerous because it disregards what Obama has always voiced—he identifies as black because the world views him as black, and there are real, immediately felt repercussions regarding safety and legality within that racialized frame. He identifies as biracial because he expressly *does* acknowledge the white mother and grandparents who raised him. Her assertion seems to deliberately obfuscate this possibility as an effort to determine parameters for race that disallow the very nuance that identifying as multiracial or biracial must by all means allow—and it is this limiting falsehood of the multi-raciality that is damaging, as it discounts the felt quotidian experiences of people of color in a world that normalizes whiteness and renders blackness abject. This reality must be acknowledged, even while uplifting multi-raciality and biraciality as valid and discrete identities. In this sense, the active assertion must not be that race is a social construction, especially without addressing the ways in which the United States desires race as a legitimate means of categorization and stratification. This distinction is critical. As Michael P. Jeffries notes in *Paint the White House Black*,

The danger in affirming race as a social construction is that this understanding is easily distorted into the false belief that race does not exist or does not matter. The problem is compounded by exalting 'assimilation' as part of the moral quest to achieve a color-blind society, where people's attitudes and behaviors are completely liberated from racial thinking and everyone is treated equally regardless of color. The impulse towards color blindness, combined with the belief that racism is a thing of the past, results in 'racism without racists,' as the institutional foundation for racism remains intact despite a reduction in attitudinal antipathy towards racial others ([20], p. 4).

This contemporary insistence that race is merely a social construction intentionally undercuts the actual impact of race in the lives of people of color and may lead to what has been described as "the new racism", which "draw[s] on the coded lexicon of color-blind racism ('those urban people' or 'those people

on welfare’) to both preserve white privilege and deflect charges of racial discrimination” ([21], p. 24). Conversations about race cannot occur in a space where the pretense is that no one sees color. Ultimately, framing Obama’s declaration of his blackness as in opposition to his biraciality is not only ahistorical but implies that somehow his experiences as biracial are more substantive than his experiences as a black man—an identity that he himself claims and that, he has noted, others attribute to him on sight. Despite Chang’s claim that race is “an almost useless construct,” Obama’s self-identification has meaning for biracial and multiracial populations, as well as black populations seeking acknowledgment of the impact of racialization on lived experiences.

#### 4. A Refusal of the “Post”

Even before the first election, in May of 2008, Ta-Nehisi Coates elucidated the potential influence of Barack Obama’s candidacy and ascendancy. He wrote for *The Atlantic*, “Whatever comes of it from here on out for the larger country, Obama has redefined blackness for white America, has served notice that wherever we are, we are. What he is positing is blackness as a valid ethnic identity with its own particular folkways and yet still existing within the broader American continuum” [22]. Obama’s assertion of the multiplicity of identity—and the significance of identity politics and choosing—had already begun to influence our understanding of people of color in political spheres and the real application of the post-soul impulse surrounding the multiple possibilities of race and pride within the nuances of racial performance. Indeed, as Coates formulates so succinctly, “Already a wave of black politicians—Deval Patrick, Corey Booker, Jesse Jackson, Jr.—have raised a similar banner, and there is nothing ‘postracial’, ‘postblack’, or ‘transcendental’ about it” [22]. The real critical application of the post-soul, then, can be found in the ways that it shapes a future understanding of race—not by tearing race asunder, but instead by asserting the ways that its existence as a social construct underscores the fact that it was historically constructed to create a hierarchy that still exists in significant ways. In fact, to this end, the essentializing of race is damaging in all its forms: the racial binary, an exclusionary idea of biracial or multiracial identity, or any hierarchy that presumes either/or in place of both/and. It is through acknowledging and critiquing the power dynamics inherent in racial essentialism that the contemporary moment opens up this significant space for play in mixed-race identity formation.

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4. Ansari was still relatively “up-and-coming” at the time but has certainly achieved high comedic status and standing at this point, particularly with the success of his Netflix series, *Master of None*.
5. In fact, many of Ansari’s most well-known jokes revolve around his encounters with famous African American musicians, such as Kanye West and R. Kelly.
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8. The implications of “talking black”—Popularized through portmanteau as a “blaccent”—Have especially come under consideration in recent years with the success of rapper, Iggy Azalea. Azalea is a white, female, Australian rapper whose speaking voice is marked by an Australian accent and dialect but whose rap persona and voice mimic the sounds and phrasings associated with African American and Atlanta “Dirty South” cultures.
9. Danzy Senna sardonically describes this possibility as the “Mulatto Millennium”.
10. The “post-soul” is a term popularized by Mark Anthony Neal in his *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* to describe those individuals who came of age after the Civil Rights Movement. The term attempts a distinction between the identity formation and artistic output of (primarily) African Americans whose understanding of self was shaped by participating in and bearing witness to the Civil Rights Movement and those who never experienced it first-hand.
11. Clarence E. Walker, and Gregory D. Smithers. *The Preacher and the Politician*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, p. 8.
12. *Pootie Tang* is a satire of the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Pootie is a consummate “ladies’ man” who overcomes adversity through sheer coolness and the power of a belt inherited from his late father. The film, based on a *Chris Rock Show* sketch, was poorly reviewed. Louis C.K. has said that he was not a part of the editing process and that the finished project did not represent his vision for the film. Still, the film retains a strong following and is viewed as a camp or kitsch.
13. An interesting possibility, to be sure, when *Louie* depicts no other love interests, potential or realized, who are not phenotypically white.
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