Introduction

Welcome to Post-Racial America

As my son and I walked down the street, taking our usual route with our dog, we crossed paths with a man I’d never seen in our neighborhood before. He appeared to be white and seemed to be looking for something specific, as if he needed directions. He smiled at us as we approached, looked at the dog, and asked from a few yards away, “What breed is that?” I told him she was a mix: “Australian Shepherd and Beagle, or so we were told by the dog rescue society.” He petted her, smiled, and then looked me right in the face to ask his next question: “What kind of mix are you?”

Just another day in post-racial America, I thought.

* * *

How is it that in what’s termed “post-racial America,” people seem to keep finding ways to keep talking about race? Race is a common topic of conversation and a predictable source of moments of confusion and comedy, as well as of desolation and violence. We are regularly told that things have changed—we are now “post-race”—but exactly how and why those changes have come about and what the changes mean are matters of continuing debate. In mundane and formal settings, citizens confront
race in subtle and obvious ways every day. From celebrations of the inauguration of the first black president to news of a neo-Nazi attack in Norway, race and racism remain salient features of our world. In the wake of social movements for justice, generational change, cultural exchange, immigration, and other phenomena that reshape our racial realities, a new question has erupted in the last decade: Are we post-racial?

The Post-Racial Mystique explores how a variety of media outlets—the news, network television, and online independent media—define, deploy, and debate the term “post-racial” in their representations of American politics and society. Media discourses and imagery help us to map the contours of change in society’s understanding of race. The book draws upon a variety of disciplines—communication studies, sociology, political science, cultural studies—in order to understand emergent strategies for framing discussions of post-racial America. Each chapter presents a case study of these strategies and explores how and whether each contends with (or ignores) remaining racial inequalities and social tensions, as well as what (if any) future for race is imagined. The diverse case studies illuminate the ways in which media texts and appeals cast U.S. history, reimage interpersonal relationships, employ statistics, and inventively redeploy other identity categories in a quest to formulate different ways of responding to race.

The cases in this book were selected in order to sample (although not systematically) different genres and media outlets. Because the public engages in a mix of specialty and mass media consumption, it is important to survey how both broad-based and niche media wrestle with questions of race in the twenty-first century. Moving from media targeted to general audiences (mainstream news and prime-time television series) to messages targeted to particular well-defined groups (specialty Christian digital media and progressive blogs) and to audience interactions (Facebook discussion groups and focus groups), the case studies shed light on some of the emerging modes of contemporary post-racial discourse, revealing recurrent themes and problematic tensions around race, gender, family, and political allegiances. Across these varied expressions of the post-racial, I explore how communicators work to (re)create and/or re-envision a sense of community, inspire (or reject) new vehicles for multicultural inclusion, and confront the facts of persistent racial inequalities in the United States.
The Emergence of “Post-Racial”

While the term “post-racial” was not commonly used in the 1980s and 1990s, discussions of the meaning of race—particularly the meaning of black identity—were widespread. In the explosion of black media and celebrity culture of the 1980s and the culture wars, commentators from a wide variety of media, political, and scholarly venues pondered the meaning of blackness in the so-called “post–civil rights era.” Nelson George, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West wrote about the pop culture and political spectacles of blackness from Michael Jackson’s dominance of the pop charts to Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill’s hearing, hip hop, OJ’s ride, and Lisa Leslie’s WNBA dunk. Debates over the meaning of black identity and the continued existence of racism swirled around Spike Lee’s films, novels such as The Women of Brewster Place and The Color Purple, and the TV juggernauts of the Cosby Show and Oprah. Vernon Reid’s band, Living Color, NBC’s A Different World, painter Jean Michel Basquiat, the quilters of Gee’s Bend, and curator Thelma Golden introduced multiple audiences to a wide variety of black subjectivities, artistic expression, and intra-group differences.

In this mix were considerations of law (the war on drugs, abortion, police brutality), immigration (do Caribbean-born blacks have a superior culture of middle-class success?), religion (why are church pews still so segregated?), education (should affirmative action remedies continue in colleges?), and politics (why don’t more black people vote Republican?).

Although most of these high-profile media discourses about race centered on blackness, Latinas/os, Asian Americans, and whites were also implicated and specifically mentioned as well. Often this was done via comparison. For example, commentators wondered if “immigrant” populations were more culturally attuned to educational and workplace success than African Americans. Others posited that Asian Americans didn’t really need affirmative action or equal cultural representation since they were “model minorities.” The advent of Whiteness Studies occasioned some hand-wringing as well, with discussions of whether academia had gone too far in analyzing the dominant racial group. In the wake of the violent unrest after the Los Angeles police officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King, news media seemed surprised to find inter-group tensions between black and Asian American groups in
California. And when the Human Genome Project began presenting its results and the mixed-race movement showed muscle in the 2000 Census hearings, *Time* magazine and others speculated on how the seemingly inevitable “merger” of human races would produce a new, unified beige human race. Still, it was not until the mid-2000s that “post-racial” became the go-to term for these kinds of changes in the American racial landscape.

Post-racial rhetoric surged during the historic 2008 election. Across the nation, pundits and politicians, bloggers and celebrities made tentative and dismissive statements about the (finally?) declining significance of race. But as the last few years have demonstrated (again), racism and racial inequalities persist and in some areas, such as wealth and health, have deepened. The gap between the aspirational post-racial discourse and the brutal realities of poverty, police profiling, anti-immigration vitriol, and mind-boggling incarceration rates for blacks and Latinos/as is wide. Yet the media continue to churn out films and shows that feature scores of people of color living discrimination-free
lives. Advertisements showcase knowledgeable professionals of all colors happily giving advice or buying products for their middle-class homes—right next door to their white friends. When someone reports a racist incident on the news, sources scramble over each other to deny any racist intent or impact of the event in question. They point to millionaire black athletes, Asian American collegians, and, of course, our biracial president as proof of that America is post-racial. This book explores the post-racial mystique conjured by the disjuncture between the entrenched effects of institutional racism and the media texts that deny—or purport to resolve—racial inequalities.

Post-Racial Media

The use of the term “post-racial” is both widespread and ecumenical in media—commentators and partisans from the Right, Left, and center have embraced, questioned, and mocked the term over the past decade, with increasing intensity during the 2008 election. The proliferation of this word suggests hopes and fears about race, democratic progress, and multiculturalism—fears that stem from the decades’ long “culture wars,” struggles over the meaning and extent of the impact of civil rights era reforms, and the role of the state in mediating identity politics and redistributive justice. It emerged in popular discourse at a time when the human genome project “proved” that there aren’t “different races;” that we humans are more alike than different; that race is a social construct, not a constituent element of humanity. However, as Eric K. Watts summarizes,

Treating “race” as merely a social construction misses a crucial facet of its nature; the power of tropes of race . . . [that are] coded into the institutions we inhabit and the social relations regulated by them. . . . Saying that “race” is a “fiction” does very little to disable its vigorous affirms. . . . The trope of the “postracial” enunciates the “demise” of “race”; meanwhile . . . strategists capture and redeploy the haunting and ravenous affirms of “race.”

The way this trope operates, however, varies across media and depends in part on who’s defining—or disputing—what “post-racial” is and means.
Introduction

Post-Racial Discourses: Embracing Diversity through Neoliberal Logics

Hosts of media scholars have investigated how post-racial representations and discourses operate in the contemporary United States. Mainstream media suggest our society requires no further political or social activism to achieve equal opportunity for people of all races. This post-racial vision of an already-achieved multicultural nation draws upon neoliberal ideologies of market individualism, whereby race/ethnicity presents us with specific choices to navigate: whether to or not to join groups founded by people of our race; whether to consume cultural products that reflect the customs or tastes of racial Others. Post-racial discourses obfuscate institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves or their families. Post-racial discourses resonate with neoliberal discourses because of their shared investment in individual-level analysis and concern with individual freedoms. Remedies that draw upon group solidarity or require state or other kinds of intervention in the marketplace—a realm imagined to be neutral, organized by self-interested individual choices—are deemed suspect and anathema to values such as merit and hard work.

For example, scholars have analyzed how neoliberal post-racial logics of the reality TV show America’s Next Top Model compel contestants of color to “embrace the particular aspects of their non-white racialization that the market deems attractive” and hide the rest. Contestants with ambiguous skin tones celebrate how they can provide the modeling industry with an array of “looks” that are saleable in a time of multiracial chic. As one model gushed, “I could bring a lot of diversity, a lot of versatility, because I can pass for Latina . . . Asian . . . black.” This show and others reinforce the notion that racial identities are malleable, yet differently valued in the marketplace. However, nowhere is there recognition of the racist aspects of that valuation system that continues to value whiteness or near-whiteness over other “looks.” When darker skinned contestants lose points, their failures are framed in terms of not making the right moves with their difference. The judges’ undervaluation of their racial performances is understood as “objective” and just the way the business works, not a product of prejudice or deeply rooted white dominance of the fashion industry. The show fosters
the post-racial idea that everyone has the same degrees of freedom to choose their preferred level of ethnic/racial identification, while ignoring continued stereotyping and the privileges of whiteness. Likewise, in news reports about the subprime loan crisis, the banks were deemed “too big to fail,” while the disproportionate number of people of color with mortgage woes seemed preternaturally doomed to failure by many commentators. When the massive numbers of foreclosures in black and Latina/o neighborhoods made headlines, many editorialists framed the issue in terms of the failure of black and Latina/o homebuyers to educate themselves on how to negotiate a sound mortgage. Copious evidence of fraudulent loan practices was swept aside in favor of a neoliberal, post-racial view of a marketplace that faltered due to naïve or greedy individuals.

Similarly, on “Judge” shows such as Joe Brown and others, the legal problems of the mostly African American, Latina/o, and poor litigants are contrasted with the bootstrapping life story of Judge Brown. Brown and other TV judges consistently use racist and sexist stereotypes to lambast the lifestyles and decision-making of participants in the trials. Unemployment, single parenthood, lack of access to education—all are chalked up to lack of willpower.

A related way of conveying post-racial illusions in the media is through a “celebration” of differences. As with the models who “worked” their ambiguous ethnicity for the industry, here post-racial logic responds to demographic changes and globalization of media to maximize market share. As Jonathan Rutherford writes, “Paradoxically, capitalism has fallen in love with difference: advertising thrives on selling us things that will enhance our uniqueness and individuality. . . . From World Music to . . . ethnic TV dinners to Peruvian hats, cultural difference sells.” Advertisers fill magazine spots with carefully blended groups of attractive people of different races, inviting us to consume the mix without having to think about what social and political practices would be necessary to make our neighborhood or workplace as diverse as the ads. Multiracial people in particular help facilitate a sense of safe diversity, satisfying the need to bring color into the frame without conflict. For example, media scholar Jon Kraszewski demonstrates how MTV’s push to retool its liberal image to be more friendly to conservatives led it to increase multiracial cast members on The Real World after 2000. MTV feared that white conservatives had
been offended by past seasons’ representations of white rural contestants who expressed racist views—views criticized by urban black and liberal white cast members. Casting and editing shaped multiracial people into “bridges” between black and white who could inspire tolerance in contrast to the show’s prior dependence on interracial conflict for drama. This strategy echoes 1990s and 2000s news discourses that positioned multiracial people as conduits to a post-racial society.

Another post-racial approach offers this solution to the race problem: Substitute more “legitimate” social identities for racial identities. While many on the Left have argued for decades that class, not race, should be the main identification for progressive struggles, the Right has recently amplified its use of this post-racial strategy in terms of religion and nation, arguing these categories provide more stability and possibilities for social cohesion than race. Moreover, in the wake of 9/11, attacks on multiculturalism were launched in part on the idea that “tolerance” of differences had gone too far. Therefore, a return to a national identity grounded in Judeo-Christian principles was necessary to squelch the alleged excesses of multicultural relativism. The September 11 attacks amplified concerns about “Other” enemies within, providing proponents of assimilation with a dramatic, violent example of what they saw as the endgame for multicultural tolerance: endless fragmentation amongst groups and internecine battles for ideological purity. After the attacks, many commentators insisted that the impetus was on people of color and non-Christian religions to prove their American-ness, to attend more to similarities with other Americans than to differences. In analyzing these discourses, Tariq Modood discusses how they presented multiculturalism either as a failed experiment or as a fait accompli requiring no further state or social intervention. For her part, Susan Searls Giroux illustrates how the attacks were used to justify neoconservative revival of the culture wars, wherein the Right framed any attempt to discuss racial inequalities, the unjust profiling of Muslim Americans, and hate crimes against those who “looked Arab” as divisive and anti-American.

But promoting national identity does not work equally for all racialized Others. For example, Evelyn Alsultany analyzed how non-profit and government agencies utilized advertising campaigns in an attempt to disrupt the association between American Muslims and terrorism and assert their patriotism. She concludes that the public service spots
reinforced existing racist and Orientalist representations of Arab and Islamic peoples by highlighting the exceptionally patriotic attributes of individual Muslim Americans and families in images and texts that reinforced an Us-Them binary. The implied comparison group—Other Muslims who are essentially anti-Western—required Muslim citizens to “prove their loyalty to the nation for a chance at being imagined as part of the diverse national community.” Political rhetoric and press reports suggested strongly that only so much difference—and specific performances of difference—were tolerable post-9/11. Here, being post-racial required people of color—in this case, people of Arab descent and/or Muslim faith—to silently accept racial profiling as a sacrifice for the nation and to tacitly agree to refrain from exercising their First Amendment rights to satisfy a barely tolerant majority.

Substitutions of more “legitimate” identity categories also have problematic implications for policy. Supporters of class-based affirmative action, for example, argue that if race is removed from the table, programs based on income disparities alone will solve the problem of the race gap in education. This thinking is flawed, however, as has been borne out in states such as Texas, where the lauded “Ten Percent Plan” has not increased the number of black and Latino/a students at flagship state universities as promised; indeed, some analyses found decreases in enrollment. The class-not-race approach fails to recognize the intersections of race and class; thus, class-only policies will not remedy the subtle and not-so-subtle effects of racial discrimination and segregation that operate in K–12 educational institutions or in other facets of college admissions criteria. Although many liberals hope that class-based policies will resonate with white voters who switched party allegiances in the Reagan era, there is little proof that strategies of “New Democrats” for using class to get at race have dampened racial resentment. This approach also fails to confront the issue of social responsibility for racial discrimination.

Post-Racial Representations: Comedy and Casting—But Hold the Conflict

Another variant on post-racialism is what some have taken to calling “hipster racism” or “equal-opportunity offending” in comedy. Sitcom
writers, stand-up comics, and others “ironically” spew racial epithets and stereotypes as part of their jokes, all the while winking at the audience that they’re not really racist—they’re making fun of racists, right? In the post-racial entertainment world, anything goes because we “all” know it’s inappropriate to be racist—so the racist jokes are a hip way of pushing boundaries. Anyone who protests is uptight and humorless. As writer Liddy West puts it, hipster racism is expressed in the attitudes of “educated, middle-class white people (like me—to be clear, I am one of those) who believe that not wanting to be racist makes it okay for them to be totally racist.”

Shows like South Park, Tosh.O, and countless stand-up routines, Twitter hashtags, and YouTube videos exhibit this hipster, shock-value post-racial humor. Moreover, the same kind of humor is often unleashed to refute criticism of the continued dominance of white actors, writers, and producers in mainstream media. Recently, critics of the all-white hit HBO show Girls were treated to lynching jokes and snarky comments about the movie Precious by the show’s defenders and head writer.

One web article on the Girls controversy linked to a 1979 piece by music journalist Lester Bang, in which he recounted how he decided to stop the habit of using “nigger” to prove he was “edgy” after he was confronted by the pain he caused an African American friend.

Ivan Julian told me that whenever he hears the word “nigger,” no matter who says it, black or white, he wants to kill. Once when I was drunk I [said] that the only reason hippies ever existed in the first place was because of niggers, and when I mentioned it to Ivan while doing this article I said, “You probably don’t even remember—” “Oh yeah, I remember,” he cut me off. And that was two years ago, one ostensibly harmless little slip. You take a lifetime of that, and you’ve got grounds for trying in any way possible, even if it’s only by convincing one individual at a time, to remove those words from the face of the earth. . . . Another reason for getting rid of all those little verbal barbs is that no matter how you intend them, you can’t say them without risking misinterpretation by some other bigoted asshole; your irony just might be his cup of hate.

When hipsters are criticized, their reactions usually dismiss or ignore the pain people of color and other people who are objects of hipster bigot jokes. The freedoms and pleasures of whites are privileged over
the desires of people of color to decrease their exposure to racist speech. As West wrote in her blog posting about why hipster racism is still racist, “It's all tied up with the deliberately obtuse people who conflate ‘freedom of speech’ with ‘immunity from criticism’ . . . [Racist jokes] hurt people. Why do you want to hurt people?”23 Likewise, Channing Kennedy of Colorlines wrote that defenders of hipster racism argue that “only bad people are susceptible to racism, so therefore it's okay for us good people to pretend to be racist for comedy's sake. Anyone who doesn't like it is the real racist.”24 The ironic/humorous post-racial stance misunderstands the meaning of the social construction of race. It translates social construction to mean that race isn't real and is malleable and that each individual can therefore make of it what s/he will. This misreading of social construction leaves out scholars’ and activists’ attention to how the changing construction of racial identity manifests within institutional and social processes that reinforce inequalities born in earlier eras. The power of race—even if it is not a proper biological or fixed category—is a measurable phenomenon.25

This is not to say, of course, that humor can't be anti-racist. Indeed, scholars such as Bambi Haggins and Mel Watkins have chronicled how African American comedians have used their routines and sketches to resist and undermine racism. But post-racial humorists aren't always clearly anti-racist, as humor need not indicate responsibility or directly indict people in power. For example, Haggins discusses how breakout comedy star Dave Chappelle appeals to white audiences in part because many of his racial sketches are often vague about issues of whiteness and power.26 In contrast, Jonathan Rossing offers Stephen Colbert as a satirist who endeavors to make clear the privileges of whiteness in his post-racial spoofing of neoconservative pundits and politicians. He describes how one of Colbert's mock editorials disrupts “familiar discourses of colorblindness and offers a counter-hegemonic critique of naturalized ideologies of whiteness.”27 This leads to the next form of post-racialism: post-racism.

Post-Racialism as Anti-Racism

The proliferation of post-racial discourse is partly inspired by scholars of critical race theory and cultural studies who call for us to embrace
notions of hybridity and intersectionality, constructs that should generate more and better ways to combat racism without using terms tied to essentialist understandings of identity. The broad circulation of post-racial discourse suggests a yearning for our communities to be healed of racism, not just to “get beyond race.” This, however, is the least frequent connotation of post-racial in the media examined in this book. Now that institutionalized racist regimes have been partly dismantled, how do we deal with difference? This is the question that the post-racial begs: When we get “beyond race”—and, more importantly, the racism that structured our society for so long—how does race work? Certainly the physical characteristics we’ve identified as “racial” do not disappear from our field of vision or biological code. Do we create mechanisms to reform the partial assimilation strategies of the past that allowed for various European immigrants to “melt” into the American pot such that “visible” racial minorities also have equal access to becoming recognized as legitimate American citizens? Or is there a way for difference to matter in a more transformative way? How do we reshape society when we have few models for pluralism that don’t rest on hierarchies based on racial and gender and sexual orientation differences?

Post-racial media touch on these questions in varying ways.

Not all post-racial media are “bad.” We should be happy, for example, that we live in a time when networks feel pressure to integrate television show casts. Moreover, we are now able to confront people who express hurtful racial beliefs, even as we acknowledge their freedom of expression. And, following Edward Schiappa’s caution that it is impossible to create representations that will elicit from all audiences the “right” responses in terms of attitudes or stereotyping behavior, I recognize that we cannot hold any particular media text to some standard of representational perfection to satisfy all peoples of all racial backgrounds. That being said, however, surveying the types of narratives that are widely available to audiences about what “post-racial” means show that there is a surplus of individualistic approaches and ahistorical frameworks, at the same time that there remains a deficit of representations of a post-racial society authored by people of color—the very people who would benefit most from the end of racism and racist assumptions. The most widely available approaches to the post-racial are troubling because they inherit a lot of the same elements of past
articulations of how to solve the color line in ways that are seemingly oblivious to the critiques and contributions of people of color and their allies to rethinking race and racism. This book explores some of these post-racial media phenomena.

The Plan of the Book

The first chapter, “Post-Racial News: Covering the ‘Joshua Generation,’” explores how the term “post-racial” became widespread in dominant news discussions of politics and culture. Drawing on an exhaustive analysis of news items collected in the Lexis-Nexis news database, this chapter illustrates how the term went from obscurity in the 1990s to a widely used framing device in the mid-2000s. Although “post-racial” is now a commonplace adjective used by journalists and pundits, what the term means remains controversial and in flux. After delineating its different uses, the chapter argues that while the debate over the term is healthy and necessary, the effect of applying “post-racial” can be to close down many productive avenues for public discussion.

Chapter 2 explores the strategy of replacing race with an ostensibly more legitimate collective identity, religion. “Brothers from Another Mother: Rescripting Religious Ties to Overcome the Racial Past” examines specialty conservative Christian media created to reach out to African Americans. These media appeals to black voters often attempt to rewrite black Civil Rights movements as primarily spiritual and Christian-oriented, thereby suggesting an impetus for Christian fellowship with whites in the present. Displacing the political and racial elements of these movements is suspect, however, and requires significant forgetting and forgiveness on the part of African Americans, who are encouraged to overlook the racially divisive strategies employed in the recent past by the same organizations and individuals authoring these media appeals. After analyzing one such appeal, the 2006 broadcast program Justice Sunday III, the chapter shifts to a study of African American Christians who watched segments of the program. Participants in the focus groups were generally skeptical of the motives of white speakers featured in the program—particularly those identified with the Republican Party. However, many of the participants also said they appreciated and enjoyed the speeches given by African Americans.
Chapter 3, “The Post-Racial Family: Parenthood and the Politics of Interracial Relationships on Network TV,” features an analysis of NBC’s prime-time drama Parenthood, a remake of the popular movie of the late 1980s. From its casting and inclusion of more people of African descent, Parenthood is clearly a different text racially than its movie ancestor. However, the portrayal of those African American characters is not necessarily an unambiguous step forward. While well-meaning in its attempt to engage with social issues and portray the multicultural realities of California, the intergenerational drama continues to draw upon some of the oldest tropes of black/white romantic relationships and sexual interaction.

Chapter 4, “Post-Racial Audiences: Discussions of Parenthood’s Interracial Couple” provides an analysis of fan responses to the show on its official Facebook site. Fans have constructed specific discussion topics and threads about the romantic pairings of black and white characters, and often remark upon what they see as fair or unfair characterizations of the couple, their behaviors, and their problems. These conversations—which often get heated—demonstrate not only that the show is problematic in its portrayals of the interracial family, but also that viewers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds are invested in talking through their different interpretations. They see the show as an important potential site for learning—or unlearning—old-style representations of interracial couples and children.

Chapter 5, “Not ‘Post-Racial,’ Race-Aware: Blogging Race in the Twenty-First Century,” examines a handful of blogs and websites that have gained circulation within traditional media as well as the Internet. Three websites in particular—Racialicious, the Black Snob, and ColorLines—exemplify a diverse, complex set of concerns and approaches to rethinking race in the twenty-first century. These sites provide readers with information and perspectives that were rare in the news media analyzed in chapter 1. Moving fluidly between identity groups, pop culture, and politics, these sites suggest that post-racialism requires us to be actively anti-racist in our everyday lives, and remind us that any post-racial era will be the product of much more discussion and reform.

In conclusion, the book presents a meditation on race, media, and memory and suggests that a vigorous re-examination of how we tell the
stories of our racial past is necessary both to demystify post-racialism and to learn strategies for promoting racial justice.

I deliberately chose the title *The Post-Racial Mystique* not only for its resonance with Betty Friedan’s classic text, but also because I believe there are parallels between my subject and Friedan’s insights about the unnamed malaise felt by women of a certain age and class in the 1950s and 1960s even as the media and countless experts told them that married mothers were living the dream. While desires to think about activities outside managing a household were dismissed as folly, or even regarded as a road to psychological and familial ruin, magazines, television shows, and advertisements portrayed the American housewife as “freed by science and labor-saving appliances from . . . the drudgery [of housework]. . . . She was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.”

Likewise, members of Generation Millennial—also known as Gen M, the most multiracial generation in American history—are described as free to interact with a smorgasbord of cultures, races, ethnicities, and religions without any further need for political activism. They can allegedly pick and choose how racial identity matters to them, as well as take their pick of colleges, workplaces, neighborhoods, and consumer goods in ways their forebears who fought for racial equality only dreamed.

But as with the dream concocted by the feminine mystique, the post-racial mystique is faulty in its reduction of social and political aspirations to consumer and individual choice. It narrowly interprets prior generations’ struggle as one for market-oriented freedoms rather than a transformation of the society and common understandings of our humanity, our relations with each other, our responsibilities to each other, regardless of race, color, or creed. Hence, though the voices that declare or represent a post-racial utopia in America are loud and hopeful, when we are reminded by ugly incidents in the news or unkind interactions on the job that race still matters, we feel unease, and wonder what’s wrong with us. The gap between many of our daily experiences of race and the shiny, happy multiracial faces that smile at us from billboards and TV screens reveals that the road to post-racial America remains very long. This book doesn’t provide a single definition of “post-racial” or a solution to “the race problem.” What it endeavors to do is help describe how post-racial media have further complicated,
and in some ways frustrated, national conversations about race and democratic progress.

* * *

Returning to my walk with my son: When I was asked about my “mix” on the heels of giving information about my dog’s breeding, it was clear to me that the man had identified me not as a canine, but as a so-called “mixed-race” human. This was confirmed when (after taking a moment to choose between a snappy comeback and a calm, honest response) I decided to provide a brief account of my parents’ identities: “My mother is German American, my father is African American.” He smiled again, pointing at us as he replied, “I thought so—I can see that North African in you and him. I’m a mix too—Irish, German, Lithuanian, and Jew. Most of us white folks got Jew in us, but most are afraid to admit it.” He went on to say he was looking for a car he was repossessing and had to “get on with that business.” After we exchanged a wave, he went up the hill toward a deserted Jeep, which he proceeded to drive away.

My new acquaintance’s mode of conceptualizing identity, which mixed categories of race, ethnicity, geography, and religion, is indicative of the fluid, shifting ways most people naturalize and articulate racial identities today. It also reveals how supposedly old frameworks for race—such as the idea that “Jew” is deemed by some as “separate” from and inferior to “white” and that race is “in you” (is “North African” a race or a region?) via blood—continue to have purchase in the twenty-first century. This strange amalgamation of acknowledging racial “mixing” with ease, while still depending on biological constructions of race and culture, is also indicative of the problem with the use of “post” with “racial.” As Thomas Holt notes, “post signals its ambiguity: different from what preceded it, but not yet fully formed or knowable.” The problem with post-racial media is that acknowledgements that we are still grafting our “new” racial understandings onto those of the past are rare. We pretend to our peril that racism is safely in our past. We must recognize that we haven’t fully grappled with the legacy of de jure let alone de facto racism, and cannot allow post-racial optimism to blind us to the corrosive, continuing effects of race in the contemporary world.