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Illustration by Jordin Isip

## A more accurate picture

By Jim Sleeper

**C**ommunity" is a much-abused word, but Susan Graham gets this month's George Orwell prize for using it where it really doesn't apply. "We do not want to be the 'check-all-that-applies' community. We want to be the multiracial community," says Graham, president of Project RACE, a Georgia organization protesting the Clinton administration's likely decision not to create a new "multiracial" designation for people of mixed parentage to check on the next U.S. Census.

Beg pardon, but if a child of, say, a Chinese-American mom and an Irish-American dad shares the same "community" with the child of an African-American dad and American Jewish mom, that community already has a name. It is called America. And the last thing we need is some new racial banner to wave as Americans answer the Census.

If anything, we need no racial designations—or fewer people checking the ones we do have.

Our skin colors mean a lot less now than they did 50 years ago. No longer does skin color alone automatically signal any particular religious, cultural or political identity, especially in cities being deluged by new immigrants.

The old racial ground is shifting under our feet. Demographics are changing with the slow but steady rise in interracial marriages. More than 2 million young Americans are already several generations removed from any easily recoverable racial or ethnic designation. And as demographics change, so do attitudes that equate racial and political identities.

New evidence of this came last fall, when voters discredited the government's assumption that because your skin color foretells your interests and politics, blacks could get elected to Congress only if they were handed majority-black districts to run in. When the Supreme Court threw out that idea, the same obsessive, color-coding activists who now want us corralled on the Census cried gloom and doom: Without majority-black districts, they said, black incumbents could never win.

Well, they all did win—and this in the deep South, where hundreds of thousands of white voters sent

Cynthia McKinney, Sanford Bishop, Corinne Brown and other blacks back to Congress.

My new book, "Liberal Racism," has a full account of this and asks: What else will it take to make color-coders rethink their belief that we must always label and count people by race in order to achieve justice?

From Georgia to Richard M. Daley's Chicago, there's a momentum underway, which well-meaning racialists would be wise not to meddle with too much. They should nurture racial change, not try to freeze-frame/micromanage it with more labeling and litigation based on the assumption that everyone is operating in bad faith.

Admittedly, this is a hard lesson to learn. Not everyone wants to let go of the racial labeling. Even while rightly recommending against the new "multiracial" designation this week, a federal interagency task force wrongly recommended doing away with the "other" category on the U.S. Census.

So the effort to corral us all into racial and ethnic holding pens continues: If you can't choose one race, choose two or more, they say. If you're Tiger Woods, go ahead and check white, black, Asian and Native American all at once, since all apply.

Well, I can't speak for Tiger, but I hope he says, "No thanks" and joins me—a white man whose four grandparents all came from the same province in Lithuania—in writing "American" or "other" and answering to no other designation.

To do that isn't to renounce all pride in racial or cultural heritage; it's to declare that government should get out of the racial and cultural heritage business.

Nor does refusing to pick a race on a Census form or in drawing an electoral district mean that you think racism no longer exists; it's to say, as those Southern white voters apparently did, that to fight racism and strengthen the American "community," we must seize every political and civic challenge.

The writer Richard Rodriguez says there ought to be a bumper sticker saying, "Assimilation happens." It's happening. It's our destiny. Let's live up to it by finding the courage to slip away from "communities" based solely and formally on race.

Jim Sleeper is the author of "Liberal Racism."