

He's Not Black

Advertisement

By Marie Arana
Sunday, November 30, 2008; B01

He is also half white.

Unless the one-drop rule still applies, our president-elect is not black.

We call him that -- he calls himself that -- because we use dated language and logic. After more than 300 years and much difficult history, we hew to the old racist rule: Part-black is all black. Fifty percent equals a hundred. There's no in-between.

That was my reaction when I read these words on the front page of this newspaper the day after the election: "Obama Makes History: U.S. Decisively Elects First Black President."

The phrase was repeated in much the same form by one media organization after another. It's as if we have one foot in the future and another still mired in the Old South. We are racially sophisticated enough to elect a non-white president, and we are so racially backward that we insist on calling him black. Progress has outpaced vocabulary.

To me, as to increasing numbers of mixed-race people, [Barack Obama](#) is not our first black president. He is our first biracial, bicultural president. He is more than the personification of African American achievement. He is a bridge between races, a living symbol of tolerance, a signal that strict racial categories must go.

Of course there is much to celebrate in seeing Obama's victory as a victory for African Americans. The long, arduous battles that were fought and won in the name of civil rights redeemed our Constitution and brought a new sense of possibility to all minorities in this country. We Hispanic Americans, very likely the most mixed-race people in the world, credit our gains to the great African American pioneers of yesterday: [Rosa Parks](#), W.E.B. Du Bois, [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

But Obama's ascent to the presidency is more than a triumph for blacks. It is the signal of a broad change with broad ramifications. The world has become too fused, too interdependent to ignore this emerging reality: Just as banks, earthly resources and human disease form an intricate global web, so do racial ties. No one appreciates this more, perhaps, than the American Hispanic.

Our multiracial identity was brought home to me a few months ago when I got my results from a DNA ancestry lab. I thought I was a simple hemispheric split -- half South American, half North. But as it turns out, I am a descendant of all the world's major races: Indo-European, black African, East Asian, Native American. The news came as something of a surprise. But it shouldn't have.

Mutts are seldom divisible by two.

Like Obama, I am the child of a white Kansan mother and a foreign father who, like Obama's, came to Cambridge, Mass., as a graduate student. My parents met during World War II, fell in love and married. Then they moved back to my father's country, Peru, where I was born.

I always knew I was biracial -- part indigenous American, part white. My mother's ancestry was easy to trace and largely Anglo-American. But on my Peruvian side, I suspected from old family albums that some forebears might actually have been African or Asian: A great-great aunt had distinctly Negroid features. Another looked markedly Chinese. Of course, no one acknowledged it. It wasn't until the DNA test

percentages were before me that I had a clear and overwhelming sense of my own history. I wasn't the product of only one bicultural marriage. My ancestral past was a tangle of races. When I sent back for an analysis of the Indo-European quotient, I was told that my "white side" came from the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, the Mediterranean and Northern Europe. There had to have been hundreds of intercultural marriages in my bloodline. I am just about everything a human can be.

Still, the same can be said for many Hispanic Americans. Perhaps because we've been in this hemisphere two centuries longer than our northern brethren, we've had more time to mix it up. We are the product of *el gran mestizaje*, a wholesale cross-pollination that has been blending brown, white, black and yellow for 500 years -- since Columbus set foot in the New World.

The Spanish and Portuguese actually encouraged interracial marriage. It wasn't that they were any more enlightened than Northern Europeans, it was that their history of exploration, colonization and exploitation had been carried out by men -- soldiers and sailors -- who were left to find local brides and settle the wilds of America. The Catholic Church, eager to multiply its ranks and expand its influence, was prepared to bless any union between two of its faithful, regardless of race. So over the years, the indigenous people of Latin America were handily converted, mixed marriages propagated abundantly, a new fusion of races was born and the Church prospered.

At first, those unions were largely between the native population and Iberians -- El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, for instance, the great 16th-century chronicler of the Spanish Conquista, was the son of a Spanish captain and an Andean princess. Later, the Atlantic slave trade sparked widespread mixing among blacks, whites and Indians -- particularly in Venezuela and Brazil. And then, in the late 19th century, a fourth ethnic group was imported to the continent in the form of Chinese coolies who came to work the guano islands and sugar fields. They, too, intermarried.

Latinos in the United States have always been difficult to fix racially. Before the late 1960s, when civil rights forced Americans to think about race, we routinely identified ourselves as white on census forms. After 1970, when a Hispanic box was offered, we checked it, although we knew that the concept of Hispanic as a single race was patently silly. But since 2000, when it became possible for a citizen to register in more than one racial category, many of us began checking them all: indigenous, white, Asian, African. It would be false to do otherwise. "Todo plátano tiene su manchita negra," as we say. Every banana has its little bit of black.

With so much history in our veins, Hispanics tend to think differently about race. The Latino population of this country continues to be, as the [New America Foundation](#)'s Gregory Rodriguez puts it, a vanguard of interracial mixing.

"By creating a racial climate in which intermarriage is more acceptable," Rodriguez writes in his new book, "Mongrels, Bastards, Orphans, and Vagabonds," Latinos are "breaking down the barriers that have traditionally served to separate whites and nonwhites in the United States." Mexican Americans, he claims, "are forcing the United States to reinterpret the concept of the melting pot . . . [to] blur the lines between 'us' and 'them.' Just as the emergence of the mestizos undermined the Spanish racial system in colonial Mexico, Mexican Americans, who have always confounded the Anglo-American racial system, will ultimately destroy it, too."

In other words, intermarriage -- the kind Hispanics have known for half a millennium, the kind from which Barack Obama was born, the kind that is becoming more visible in every urban neighborhood in America -- represents a body blow to American racism. Why don't we recognize this as the revolutionary wave that it is? Why can't we find words to describe it? Why do we continue to resort to the tired paradigm that calls a biracial man black?

Even Obama himself seems to have bought into the nomenclature. In his memoir "Dreams from My Father," he writes, "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance,

no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant." You can almost feel the youth struggling with his identity, reaching for the right words to describe it and finally accepting the label that others impose.

It doesn't have to be that way. As the great American poet [Langston Hughes](#) once wrote, "I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word 'Negro' is used to mean *anyone* who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. . . . I am brown."

Hughes was right. North America has been slow to acknowledge its racial mixing. Anti-miscegenation laws, which were prevalent in Germany under the Nazis and in South Africa during apartheid, were still the rule in a number of states here until 1967, a mere generation ago, when the case of *Loving v. Virginia* finally struck them down. The goal of those laws, unspoken but undeniable, was to maintain racial "purity," ensure white supremacy. It was not only undesirable, it was punishable for a white to procreate with a black. Or an Asian. Or an Indian. And yet a quiet cross-cultural mixing continued all the while. Even under [Thomas Jefferson's](#) own roof.

The explosion of "minorities" in the United States in the past half-century has guaranteed that ever more interracial mingling is inevitable. According to the 2000 Census, there were 1.5 million Hispanic-white marriages in the United States, half a million Asian-white marriages, and more than a quarter-million black-white marriages. The reality is probably closer to double or triple that number. And growing.

The evidence is everywhere. If not in our neighborhoods, in our culture. We see it in [Tiger Woods](#), [Halle Berry](#), [Ben Kingsley](#), Nancy Kwan, [Ne-Yo](#), [Mariah Carey](#). Yet we insist on calling these hybrids by a reductive name: Berry is black. Kingsley is white. Kwan is yellow. Even they label themselves by the apparent color of their skin. With language like that, how can we claim to live in a post-racial society?

A few years ago, after I gave a talk about biculturalism at a Pittsburgh college, a student approached me and said, "I understand everything you say. I too am a child of two cultures. My mother is German, my father African American. I was born in Germany, speak German and call myself a German-American. But look at me. What would you say I am?" She was referring to her skin, which was light black; her hair, lush and curly; and her eyes, a shining onyx. "I am fifty percent German. But no one who sees me believes it."

Few who see Barack Obama, it seems, understand that he's 50 percent white Kansan. Even fewer understand what it means to be second-generation Kenyan. It reminds me of something sociologist Troy Duster and bioethicist Pilar Ossorio once observed: Skin color is seldom what it seems. People who look white can have a significant majority of African ancestors. People who look black can have a majority of ancestors who are European.

In other words, the color of a president-elect's skin doesn't tell you much. It's an unreliable marker, a deceptive form of packaging. Isn't it time we stopped using labels that validate the separation of races? Isn't it time for the language to move on?

aranam@washpost.com

Marie Arana, the editor of Book World, is the author of American Chica, "a memoir, and the novel Cellophane. Her second novel, Lima Nights, will be published in January.

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

© 2008 The Washington Post Company