

OBAMA AND THE ARITHMETIC OF RACIAL AUTHENTICITY

by Hugh Hamilton

It used to be that whenever I was invited to participate in celebrations marking Black History Month, everyone was presumed to know what *black* meant, whose *history* we were talking about, and who gets to stake a claim to that narrative.

Then along came Barack Obama, and suddenly, it seems that everything we thought we knew no longer seems so certain.

Even before Obama officially announced his campaign for President of the United States, Daily News commentator Stanley Crouch fired the opening shot across the bow in a column titled, “*What Obama Isn’t: Black Like Me.*”¹

“When black Americans refer to Obama as ‘one of us’ I don’t know what they are talking about,” Crouch wrote. “In his new book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama makes it clear that while he has experienced some light versions of typical racial stereotypes, he cannot claim those problems as his own. Nor has he lived the life of a black American. ... if he throws his hat into the ring, he will have to run as the son of a white woman and an African immigrant. [And] if we then end up with him as our first black President, he will have come into the White House through a side door, which might, at this point, be the only one that’s open.”

Debra Dickerson, another noteworthy columnist and author of the book, *The End of Blackness*, weighed in shortly thereafter.

“Black, in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves,” Dickerson wrote. “To say Obama isn’t black is merely to say that, by virtue of his white American mom and his Kenyan dad, he is an American of African immigrant extraction...Lumping us all together erases the significance of slavery and continuing racism while giving the appearance of progress.”

Dickerson then went on to describe Obama as “a non-black on the down-low about his non-blackness.”²

And so it was that before long, we were all embroiled in a full-fledged family feud over what I call the **arithmetic of racial authenticity**.

Professor Cornel West, in his 1993 book, *Race Matters*, confronted this question of black racial authenticity head on and concluded – quite correctly in my view – that “**blackness has no meaning outside of a system of race-conscious people and practices.**” But as he further explained, “after centuries of racist degradation, exploitation, and oppression in America, being black means being **minimally subject to white supremacist abuse and**

¹ New York Daily News – November 2, 2006

² Debra Dickerson, Colorblind – www.salon.com January 22, 2007

being part of a rich culture and community that has struggled against such abuse; all people with black skin and African phenotype are subject to white supremacist abuse. Hence, all black Americans have some interest in resisting racism, even if their interest is confined solely to themselves as individuals, rather than to larger black communities. In short, **blackness is a political and ethical construct.**³

If West is right, what then are the historical forces that give rise to this unique political and ethical construct we call blackness? Is being black the same as being African American, and if not, what's the difference? Since science tells us that race has no genetic or biological basis, what is it then that has dictated our interest in this arithmetic of racial authenticity?

History Matters.

For centuries, our notions of identity in America have been dominated by a binary system of racial classification – black and white. It is a system designed to support, sustain and perpetuate the doctrine of white supremacy in America. The founding fathers made clear from the beginning that the Africans they held as slaves were not to be included as equals in the society of men. In the Constitution they adopted at Philadelphia in 1787, Blacks were to be counted as “three-fifths” of a person for the purpose of congressional apportionment.⁴

Then three years later, Congress would legislate the supremacy of white privilege even more explicitly in its Naturalization Act of 1790, stating that **only free white persons** would be eligible for American citizenship.⁵

As slave owners themselves, many of our founders were conflicted by the moral depravity of their conduct, but loath to surrender the economic security they derived from America's “peculiar institution.” Little wonder, then, that so many embraced the disreputable theories of “scientific racism.” Thomas Jefferson, despite his soaring paean to the virtues of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, exemplified that dissonance.

Though a slave owner himself, Jefferson advocated both emancipation **and** the deportation of American blacks to other countries as agents of colonization. He worried that the injustice of slavery would make it impossible for blacks and whites ever to live in peace as equals in this country, citing among his reasons: “the deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained ... and many other circumstances, which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race.”⁶

³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Beacon Press 1993) pp. 25, 26

⁴ Article 1, Section 2, Constitution of the United States

⁵ United States Congress, “An Act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization” (March 26, 1790)

⁶ Kenneth O'Reilly: *Nixon's Piano – Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton* p. 20

Yet Jefferson also harbored the notion that blacks were innately inferior to whites. “In memory, they are equal to whites,” he wrote, “[but] in reason much inferior [and] in imagination ... dull, tasteless, and anomalous.” He referred to “the real distinctions that nature has made” between blacks and whites, as an insurmountable impediment to their peaceful coexistence on equal terms.

Decades later, even the “Great Emancipator” Abraham Lincoln would betray a considerable ambivalence on this question of equality between the races. University of Alaska historian Kenneth O’Reilly describes Lincoln as “a pragmatist, not an abolitionist,” noting that in the 1850s, he favored restoration of the Missouri Compromise and opposed the effort to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law. As a candidate for the Senate in 1858, and for the presidency in 1860, Lincoln offered the following as his public position on the enslavement of black Americans:

“I am not now, nor have [I] ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black race; I am not now nor have I ever been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people.”

Like Jefferson before him, Lincoln also cited what he called “the physical differences [which] will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality.

“And inasmuch as they cannot so live,” he said, “while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior and I, as much as any man, am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”⁷

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney was therefore reflecting both the prevailing law and custom of the day when he ruled, in the 1857 Dred Scott case that “they [the negro slaves] had for more than a century been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race ... and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.”

Nor is this all a matter of ancient history. Consider, for example, Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which remained in effect until 1967 when it was invalidated by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. This law required that all persons be registered by the state according to their “racial composition” and in accordance with numerous sub-categories. The law further required that “if there be any mixture, then the racial composition of the parents and other ancestors, in as far as ascertainable” be determined “so as to show in what generation such mixture occurred.”

Moreover, under this law, “it shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person ... to marry any save a white person. For the purpose of this Act the term ‘white person’ shall apply only to the person who has no trace of any blood other than Caucasian,”⁸ although the

⁷ Ibid p.43

⁸ http://www.vcdh.virginia.edu/encounter/projects/monacans/Contemporary_Monacans/racial.html

legislation did carve out an exemption for persons qualifying under the famous Pocahontas Exception.

Racial Arithmetic

Where the arithmetic of racial authenticity gets really interesting is when you begin to dabble in inter-racial multiplication and the problem of fractions.

As the writer Lawrence Wright explains: “For most of the 19th century, the census reflected an American obsession with miscegenation. The color of slaves was to be specified as ‘B’ for Black, and ‘M’ for Mullato. In the 1890 census, gradations of mullatos were further broken down into quadroons and octoroons. After 1920, however, the Census Bureau gave up such distinctions, estimating that three quarters of all blacks in the United States were racially mixed already and that pure blacks would soon disappear. Henceforth, anyone with **any black ancestry at all** would be counted simply as black.”⁹

The decision to abandon these multiple and meaningless distinctions represented, in effect, an official capitulation to that unique American invention known as the “one drop rule,” whereby any person with a single drop of black blood anywhere in his or her ancestry is defined as black. Wright explains that the notion derives from a long discredited belief that each race had its own blood type, which was correlated with physical appearance and behavior. The antebellum South also promoted the rule as a way of enlarging the slave population with the children of slave holders. “By the 1920s in Jim Crow America, the one-drop rule was well established as the law of the land,” he writes. “**As late as 1986**, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review a lower court’s ruling that a Louisiana woman whose great-great-great-grandmother had been the mistress of a French planter, was black – even though that portion of her ancestry was three-thirty-seconds of her genetic heritage.”¹⁰

Dr. Maulana Karenga, in an essay discussing the Obama brouhaha soon after it erupted over one year ago, had a particularly trenchant observation. He described the entire debate over what he called Obama’s “racial reliability” as “an unworthy and contradictory conversation.” He noted that the entire debate revolves around “a test of racial wholeness not normally used, for we used to hold that **black blood was like the blood of Jesus: one drop makes you whole.**”¹¹

Karenga is absolutely correct in highlighting the absurdity of the entire debate. But I think there is a larger moral to the story. The contretemps over Obama’s blackness is not about Obama at all; it is about us. I suspect that Obama knows who he is, and has come to terms with the arithmetic of his own racial authenticity. It is we who are still struggling to define what it means to be black in a racialized society where blackness is not a value-

⁹ Lawrence Wright, “One Drop of Blood” The New Yorker 1994

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Maulana Karenga, The Racial Reliability of Obama: An Unworthy and Contradictory Conversation – Los Angeles Sentinel p.A9 February 15, 2007

neutral designation, but comes laden with a historical and contemporary burden of struggle for equality and justice.

And so, to the extent that the Obama campaign has become a catalyst for that conversation, and Mr. Obama himself a surrogate for this discourse, I think he has already served an enormous public purpose beyond the promise of a black man running for the White House.

****This essay is adapted from the 2008 Black History Month Lecture, delivered by the author on February 10, 2008 at the Elmont Memorial Library Nassau County, New York.***

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