

Thomas Chatterton Williams

As Black as We Wish to Be

[*New York Times*, March 18, 2012]

BEFORE YOU READ

Do you agree with the U.S. Census's decision to allow people to identify as more than one race? Why or why not? How do you think this decision might affect racial politics?

WORDS TO LEARN

stigmatization (para. 17): to affiliate with disgrace (noun)

exhortations (para. 19): statements of urgent advice (noun)

miscegenation (para. 18): marriage between different races (noun)

My first encounter with my own blackness occurred in the checkout line at the grocery store. I was horsing around with my older brother, as bored children sometimes do. My blond-haired, blue-eyed mother, exasperated and trying hard to count out her cash and coupons in peace, wheeled around furiously and commanded us both to be still. When she finished scolding us, an older white woman standing nearby leaned over and whispered sympathetically: "It must be so tough adopting those kids from the ghetto."

The thought that two tawny-skinned bundles of stress with Afros could have emerged from my mother's womb never crossed the lady's mind. That was in the early 1980s, when the sight of interracial families like mine was still an oddity, even in a New Jersey suburb within commuting distance from Manhattan. What strikes me most today is that despite how insulting the woman's remark was, we could nonetheless all agree on one thing: my brother and I were black.

Now we inhabit a vastly different landscape in which mixing is increasingly on display. In just three decades, as a new Pew Research

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Center study shows, the percentage of interracial marriages has more than doubled (from 6.7 percent in 1980 to approximately 15 percent in 2010), and some 35 percent of Americans say that a member of their immediate family or a close relative is currently married to someone of a different race. Thanks to these unions and the offspring they've produced, we take for granted contradictions that would have raised eyebrows in the past.

As a society, we are re-evaluating what such contradictions mean. The idea that a person can be both black and white — and at the same time neither — is novel in America. 4

Until the year 2000, the census didn't even recognize citizens as belonging to more than one racial group. And yet, so rapid has the change been that just 10 years later, when Barack Obama marked the "Black, African Am., or Negro," box on his 2010 census form, many people wondered why he left it at that. 5

If today we've become freer to concoct our own identities, to check the "white" box or write in "multiracial" on the form, the question then forces itself upon us: Are there better or worse choices to be made? 6

I believe there are. Mixed-race blacks have an ethical obligation to identify as black — and interracial couples share a similar moral imperative to inculcate certain ideas of black heritage and racial identity in their mixed-race children, regardless of how they look. 7

The reason is simple. Despite the tremendous societal progress these recent changes in attitude reveal in a country that enslaved its black inhabitants until 1865, and kept them formally segregated and denied them basic civil rights until 1964, we do not yet live in an America that fully embodies its founding ideals of social and political justice. 8

As the example of President Obama demonstrates par excellence, the black community can and does benefit directly from the contributions and continued allegiance of its mixed-race members, and it benefits in ways that far outweigh the private joys of freer self-expression. 9

We tend to paint the past only in extremes, as having been either categorically better than the present or irredeemably bad. Maybe that's why we live now in a culture in which many of us would prefer to break clean from what we perceive as the racist logic of previous eras — specifically the idea that the purity and value of whiteness can be tainted by even "one drop" of black blood. And yet, however offensive those one-drop policies may appear today, that 10

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offensiveness alone doesn't strip the reasoning behind them of all descriptive truth.

In fleeing from this familiar way of thinking about race, we sidestep the reality that a new multiracial community could flourish and evolve at black America's expense. Indeed, the cost of mixed-race blacks deciding to turn away could be huge. 11

With the number of Americans identifying as both black and white having more than doubled in the first decade of this century—from 785,000 to 1.8 million—such demographic shifts are bound to shape social policy decisions, playing a role in the setting and reassessing of national priorities at a time when Washington is overwhelmed with debt obligations and forced to weigh special interests and entitlement programs against each other. 12

Consider the impact that a broad re-definition of blackness might have on the nation's public school system. In the past few years, the federal government has implemented new guidelines for counting race and ethnicity, which for the first time allow students to indicate if they are "two or more races." 13

That shift is expected to change the way test scores are categorized, altering racial disparities and affecting funding for education programs. For this reason and others, the N.A.A.C.P. and some black members of Congress have expressed concern that African-Americans are at risk of being undercounted as blacks compete more than ever with other minorities and immigrants for limited resources and influence. 14

Scholars have long maintained that race is merely a social construct, not something fixed into our nature, yet this insight hasn't made it any less of a factor in our lives. If we no longer participate in a society in which the presence of black blood renders a person black, then racial self-identification becomes a matter of individual will. 15

And where the will is involved, the question of ethics arises. At a moment when prominent, upwardly mobile African-Americans are experimenting with terms like "post-black," and outwardly mobile ones peel off at the margins and disappear into the multiracial ether, what happens to that core of black people who cannot or do not want to do either? 16

Could this new racial gerrymandering result in that historically stigmatized group's further stigmatization? Do a million innocuous personal decisions end up having one destructive cumulative effect? 17

LAST year, I married a white woman from France; the only thing that shocked people was that she is French. This stands in stark contrast to my parents' fraught experience less than 10 years after the landmark 1967 18

case *Loving v. Virginia* overturned anti-miscegenation laws. It is no longer radical for people like my wife and me to come together.

According to the Pew report, while 9 percent of white newlyweds in 2010 took nonwhite spouses, some 17 percent of black newlyweds, and nearly one-quarter of black males in particular, married outside the race. Numbers like these have made multiracial Americans the fastest-growing demographic in the country. Exhortations to stick with one's own, however well intentioned, won't be able to change that. 19

When I think about what my parents endured — the stares, the comments, the little things that really do take a toll — I am grateful for a society in which I may marry whomever I please and that decision is treated as mundane. Still, as I envision rearing my own kids with my blond-haired, blue-eyed wife, I'm afraid that when my future children — who may very well look white — contemplate themselves in the mirror, this same society, for the first time in its history, will encourage them not to recognize their grandfather's face. 20

For this fear and many others, science and sociology are powerless to console me — nor can they delineate a clear line in the sand beyond which identifying as black becomes absurd. 21

Whenever I ask myself what blackness means to me, I am struck by the parallels that exist between my predicament and that of many Western Jews, who struggle with questions of assimilation at a time when marrying outside the faith is common. In an essay on being Jewish, Tony Judt observed that "We acknowledge readily enough our duties to our contemporaries; but what of our obligations to those who came before us?" For Judt, it was his debt to the past alone that established his identity. 22

Or as Ralph Ellison explained — and I hope my children will read him carefully because they will have to make up their own minds: "Being a Negro American involves a *willed* (who wills to be a Negro? I do!) affirmation of self as against all outside pressures." And even "those white Negroes," as he called them, "are Negroes too — if they wish to be." 23

And so I will teach my children that they, too, are black — regardless of what anyone else may say — so long as they remember and wish to be. 24

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. Williams asks, "Could this new racial gerrymandering result in that historically stigmatized group's further stigmatization" (para. 17)? What does *gerrymandering* mean, and what are the origins of the word?
2. What does the word *inculcate* mean (para. 7), and what part of speech is it?
3. What are two definitions of the word *margin* (para. 16)?

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. Williams writes, "The idea that such a person can be both black and white—and at the same time neither—is novel in America" (para. 4). What does the word *novel* mean in this context?
2. In the phrase, "Scholars have long maintained that race is merely a social construct, not something fixed into our nature ..." (para. 15), what does *construct* mean, and what part of speech is it?
3. What is the definition of the word *tawny* (para. 2), and what does it refer to in this article?

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. What is Williams's main argument, and where does he state it in this article?
2. What are some of the reasons Williams provides as support for his argument that multiracial people should identify as black?
3. What does Williams mean when he says that science and sociology cannot "delineate a clear line in the sand beyond which identifying as black becomes absurd" (para. 21)? How does this apply to Williams's own children and grandchildren?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. What technique does Williams use to open the article? Is this an effective opening? Why or why not?
2. Williams states that "a new multiracial community could flourish and evolve at black America's expense" (para. 11). What examples does he provide to support this statement?
3. Why does Williams quote Tony Judt in paragraph 22? What does this quote lend to Williams's argument?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. In paragraph 15, Williams states, "Scholars have long maintained that race is merely a social construct, not something fixed into our nature." Do you agree with this statement? Is race merely a social construct? Why or why not?
2. Williams concedes that his children may look white, but he still expects them to identify as black. Do you think this is plausible? What types of problems or conflict might result from this self-identification? What types of problems might result if they identified as white?
3. Williams makes a parallel of his own predicament of identification to that of Jewish self-identification. What other groups or races might have a similar predicament, and how might it differ from that of Williams?

WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. In a short essay, respond to Williams's claim that multiracial people should identify as black. Do you agree with his claim? What aspects of Williams's argument convinced you, or if you disagree, why did Williams's argument not sway your opinion?
2. Write a brief essay in which you explore race and self-identification. How do you think the idea of race is changing in an increasingly multiracial society?
3. In a short essay, discuss the importance (or non-importance) of categorization on a larger scale. We all identify with a certain group, be it a country, a political party, a specific race, or even a generation. Discuss the benefits and limitations of categorization, and use at least two quotes from Williams's essay to support your claims.

American Indian College Fund

Think Indian

[Collegefund.org, 2008–present]

BEFORE YOU VIEW

What does the expression "Think Indian" mean to you? Why do you think the designers of the ad (see p. 138) chose those two words? Why doesn't the ad's headline read instead "Think Native American"?

The American Indian College Fund, founded in 1989, is a Denver-based non-profit organization that distributes scholarships to Native American students and supports tribal colleges across the country. According to its president, Dr. Cheryl Crazy Bull, "Students at tribal colleges are among the most resilient, talented individuals in higher education today. They eagerly study, research, serve, and learn together. They overcome tremendous economic and personal obstacles in order to achieve their dreams of a higher education that provides them with both employment and the security of their rich tribal identity. Today this is even more important because economic policies and political approaches to social change are having a challenging impact on already impoverished tribal communities. Tribal college students with their talents and education can change the future of tribal nations."
