

Black or White

Althea Bennett

OS24



I am a biracial American. My father is black and my mother is white, I am the outcome of complete contrast, and as a biracial person I am faced with struggles of my very own, struggles most would not expect to find in the 21st century.

Multiracial people come from tension; our life is absorbed by our “people’s” history and that tension will forever affect us. Throughout American history, black and white people have been on opposite ends of the social spectrum and the mixing of those races causes great confusion as to where a mixed person fits in this country. Often white people believe that biracial people are polluting the white race and many blacks believe that the mixing is a result of those trying to escape from being black. Biracial people come into this world with built up tension and throughout our lives, this tension is often tested. People of two or more races, like me, are often over looked by society. We are not able to identify with both of our races in most legal forms. For example, on census and national test forms, you have to identify your race, which can be hard with the given options. Because of this, biracial people often have a hard time with understanding one of the most basic parts of defining one’s self: race. We are unable to represent ourselves completely. In most cases we have to choose one race, or become part of the category known as “other”. Biracial people don’t have much of a history, because we are not one race that can continue to reproduce ourselves, so our history comes from our two sides, and with that comes the relationship these sides have. “Biracial history” can be found in African American history, because when it comes to black history, whites are always involved. As far back as the 1700s, with slavery, or the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, blacks and whites have always been connected. From slave owners raping their slaves to hidden love during the civil rights movement, most biracial people came into this world through some kind of tension. The contrast, conflicts, and connections that blacks and whites have had will forever affect biracial people.

Like most groups of people, biracial people began to be understood for what they are when they were given a name. The original name given to the people currently called “biracial” was “Mulatto.” The definition of “Mulatto” is: “*The offspring of one white parent and one black parent. A person whose ancestry is a mixture of Negro and Caucasian.*” (Oxford Dictionary) This word comes from Spanish origins of the word “*Mule*,” which refers to an infertile hybrid of two creatures of different species (a mule is a cross between a donkey and a horse). This term is very dehumanizing to people of multiracial backgrounds; it indicates that the mixing of two races is equivalent to the mixing of species, which is something very different. The preferred term is “*Biracial*” when describing the race of those who don’t belong to a single group. The definition of “*Biracial*” is quite similar to “*Mulatto*,” it’s defined as: “of, relating to, or involving members of two races.” Although the origins of these words are very different, the meanings of the words are very similar. The former comes from a very insensitive way of thinking of multiracial people and the latter is a more sensitive way of understanding the concept of a multiracial person, with “bi-racial” literally meaning “two races.” *Mulatto* is one word that is just the start of our injustice, which most do not realize or even recognize as an actual struggle.

The contrast of blacks and whites in America is quite obvious in the physical way we think about race. In addition there is an extreme contrast in the way the history of these two races started in America. Most African-Americans came here by force, where as Most European-Americans came here on their own terms. These extreme differences affect the relationship that these two races have today. The relationship that blacks and whites in America have, come from the differences these races have had in their on-going history. The reason we have African-Americans are because of European-Americans; the original relationship these races share can be

reduced to the relationship between abducted and the abductors. This extreme contrast allows tension to build exponentially. James Baldwin speaks on the subject of color, stating: "For the sake of one's children, in order to minimize the bill they must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion – and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion." Blacks and whites have always been connected in negative and positive ways and the contrast of these races will always be evident. Color will always be there, as much as we try to ignore it, and the history of race will always be known. Race is not just a color, it is a culture and the white and black races are completely different. As W.E.B. Du Bois said: "They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, how does it feel to be a problem? They say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word." Race has become more than just the color of one's skin and the origin from which they came; it has become a way to socially divide our selves. The contrast of black and white is evident but the contrast we have created is an extraordinary one that causes much conflict. With the contrast blacks and whites hold, it has become clear where American racism was generated, right in the relationship these two races hold. Blacks and whites, started with contrast and today the line of separation is starting to gray, but there is still a clear division of light and dark.

The contrast between blacks and whites, historically and currently, has built a very strong tension between the two groups. Many conflicts were started from this tension, essentially making up what we know as the history between blacks and whites. Blacks and whites have a long history, in which they have been connected for all of America's history. "Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the "outsider." Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term "nigger"—it made them feel instantly American," (Time 5). From the outset, whites have chosen to separate themselves from blacks to prove they are above them. The history we know is very black and white, the oppressed and the oppressors. With the history of slavery, hate crimes, and segregation there has been this division of who's on top and who's on the bottom. With this amount of tension created between the two races the history is bound to be full with conflicts. "On the other hand, there are those who highlight the structural constraints on the life chances of black people. Their viewpoint involves a subtle historical and sociological analysis of slavery, Jim Crowism, job and residential discrimination, skewed unemployment rates, inadequate health care, and poor education," (West 17). In American history, blacks have always been treated as less; in comparison to whites, this affects African-Americans even today. Blacks and whites have a long history of many conflicts with many forms of segregation and currently many black Americans staying on the bottom, mimicking history in a way. The conflicts whites and blacks have had in history has built the connection the two races share; there has always been some kind of connection among these races. Through the many conflicts and negative interactions these races have had, they are always connected.

There have also been positive interactions between these two races. Integration was the start of a new positive relationship. The connection blacks and whites had shared for so many years would then be replaced with a more civil interaction. There are many cases of love between the two races. After integration became more understood, the idea of interracial marriage became more understood. In 1967, all but two states that had previously banned interracial marriage had lifted the law. “[On the interracial ban in 1990,] Alabama is the last state in the union to have such a law on its books. Although the state stopped enforcing it decades ago, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled such laws unconstitutional, the fact that it has not been officially repealed remains a sore point for many in Alabama... A recent poll in Alabama indicated high support for the bill. About 63 percent of those who responded to the poll favored lifting the ban on interracial marriage while 26 percent were opposed. Ten percent said they were not sure or had no reply,” (CNN). With interracial marriage it became more common for biracial people to accept their race and society began to understand what it means to be multi racial. With the connection between blacks and whites all these years, the creation of a “new” race became the outcome of their deepest connection. Biracial Americans were created from contrast, conflicts and connections.

The idea of mixing races has been around since we have come to define race. It may seem recent that multiracial people have existed; it is not a new thing in the history of humans to mix or to be mixed. In the book Race, Sarich and Miele touch on the history of race and the mixing of it. It states: “Aristotle made the first reference to mixture between a Greek woman and an Ethiopian: He noted that the descendants of such unions were ‘Mulattoes,’ and that should such intermarriage continue, the lines distinguishing the parental races would become blurred.” Mixing has been seen as harmful to our division; without the clear division of race, we lose so much of our social structure that is unjust that is based off of race. With what biracial people represent, all it does is threaten those who like the separation, and in turn, creates another form of tension for people of more than one race.

The history of biracial people is tough to follow, because there is not much of a traditional history in the way single race person can trace their ancestors and understand their own history. American biracial people that were half-black and half-white began with slavery. Where slaves and slave owners would consummate and create this new race of “mulatto” slaves, whether that was a result of falling in love or rape. With the mixing among slaves, the mixing continued which could lead to biracial people that would be blacker or whiter. The skin tone often determined how they would be accepted among families. When you look like your people, you stay with your people. The more white you looked, the better you would be treated amongst the other full black slaves or even just darker slaves. The history of mixing in America is quite general: “In the United States, where people of European (overwhelmingly British), American Indian, and sub-Saharan descent lived side by side but by no means equally, ‘every man became an anthropologist.’ Whenever interracial mating took place, it was white males with black, less often Indian, females. Few of these mixed-race children were accepted into the white race,” (Sarich 66). How biracial people interacted with one side and the other was all circumstantial, skin tone and features were what made one side accept them or disown them. Biracial people in early American history were not really seen as biracial but rather would fit into one of the two sides they belong too.

Within the next stages of biracial history the parents of this new race could show their love and they were more accepted but not nearly to a point were they felt safe to express it in public. Many hate crimes were committed towards interracial couples. Their love was looked at

as wrong, mixing was looked at as wrong, as if the mixing was impure. This impurity caused many to hide their love from the world and making the children of these mixes to choose a side, to choose which side they would embrace as their own. "I am jealous that biracial folks in the United States are pardoned their apparent confusion when it comes to white and black culture. Speaking as an outsider to the struggles of biracial people, I can only guess what kinds of negotiations go on in daily life as they try to register on some mythical scale of black authenticity," (Springer 71). During the 1960s, in the heart of the civil rights movement, choosing a side was the best bet for multiracial children, but in time they learned how to code switch. When having two different cultures to learn from, biracial children are often if not always able to code switch, this is when you can switch the way you act to fit in. Code switching would allow biracial people to fit in to a crowd and others would not notice their race because they can act the part. Many biracial people would stick with one side of their families; they would often stay with the side they can "pass" as part of their race. Doing this would allow them to fit more into the family that they looked more like so others would not question them. During this time period, many children would stay close to the black side of their family, because in most cases, biracial children can "pass" as black, so they wouldn't have to prove their "blackness" to their peers. Having to prove yourself to the closest people is disheartening as well as exhausting, this is still a current issue for multiracial people today.

Multiracial people are faced with daily struggles, still present in contemporary American society. With the constant questioning of identity, that we all do one race or multiracial, the hardest to uncover at the surface that many multiracial people question still today. It becomes more than just a "who am I?" but more of a "what am I?" this type of questioning is quite difficult to deal with. This inner "soul searching" is not just that it is a question you must deal with today as a multi race person. "It wasn't until 1967 that anti-miscegenation laws were declared unconstitutional. Only in 1989 was the policy demanding children of mixed race be assigned the racial status of their non-White parent abolished. And only in 2000 were multiracial individuals permitted to check multiple boxes in the U.S. Census to indicate their mixed heritage," (Multiracial Identity). It is an almost solved issue, in a legal form when identifying with race. Some forms allow you to check off more than one when asked, "What is your race?" However the majority of forms only allow you to choose one race. However "other" is always a choice. Being an "other" is essentially being a marked outcast, a left over, something they really don't care about. Not being able to be fully represented on paper is belittling to know that your information truly does not matter is there isn't a choice for it.

Filling out forms is a big part of our lives whether we like it or not. We fill forms when applying for college or when in an emergency room, we are faced with forms frequently. With the constant reminder that biracial people do not belong to a group is overwhelming. It can really hard to swallow that you don't have a place in most people's eyes legally. The feeling of not belonging comes up often in a biracial persons life but knowing how to identify yourself is the most hurtful. Race has always been a touchy subject and forever will be, but the subject of race and identity is an even deeper-rooted problem in Americas legal system. Simple questions should not feel as if your deceiving your family, having to choose is a very difficult thing to do. Multiracial people will always have issues finding or truly understanding their identity. I am a biracial American. My father is black and my mother is white, I am the outcome of complete contrast, and as a biracial person I am faced with struggles of my very own, struggles most would not expect to find in the 21st century.

Bibliography

"Alabama Considers Lifting Interracial Marriage Ban - CNN." *Featured Articles from CNN*. 12 Mar. 1999. Web. 18 Apr. 2011. <http://articles.cnn.com/1999-03-12/us/9903_12_interracial.marriage_1_interracial-house-panel-samesex-marriage?_s=PM:US>.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. New York: Dell, 1963. Print.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999.

Ellison, Ralph. "WHAT AMERICA WOULD BE LIKE WITHOUT BLACKS." *TIME.com*. 6 Apr. 1970. Web. 18 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,943970,00.html>>.

Multiracial Identity. Dir. Brian Chinhema. *Multiracial Identity*. Web. 18 Apr. 2011. <<http://multiracialidentity.com/>>.

Sarich, Vincent and Frank Miele. *Race: the Reality of Human Differences*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004. Print.

Simpson, J. A., and E. S. C. Weiner. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. Print.

Singley, Bernestine. *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill, 2002. Print.

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon, 1993. Print.