

Biracial Americans Discuss Obama's Identity

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Sen. Barack Obama has been hailed as the country's first African American to win a major party presidential nomination. But some have questioned why Obama hasn't been characterized as bi-racial, given that his mother was white. A roundtable of biracial Americans share their thoughts on racial identity and why Obama's is so important.

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MICHEL MARTIN, host:

I'm Michel Martin, and this is Tell Me More from NPR News.

Coming up, you may not know her name, but you surely know her work. She plays the longest running African-American character ever on television on NBC's Law and Order. And now S. Epatha Merkerson is up for a new honor, a Tony Award. We'll visit with her in just a few minutes.

But first, for months now we've been talking about how the Democratic presidential nomination has put race back on the table for public discussion in large part because of Senator Barack Obama. He's being described as the country's first African-American major party presidential nominee. And indeed he is, but as the son of a white American mother and a Kenyan father, he can also be described as biracial. That we are even discussing that means a change in a way we are accustomed to thinking about race in the U.S. We want to talk more about biracial identity, so we brought together a group of people who have thought more about this than most.

Joining us are Elliott Lewis. He's a television freelance journalist and author of "Fade: My Journeys in Multi-Racial America." Fanshen Cox is host of the first "Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival" and Paul Foreman (ph) is a student at the University of Pomona in California. Thank you all for coming.

Ms. FANSHEN COX (Host, "Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival"): You're welcome, delighted to be here.

Mr. ELLIOTT LEWIS (Television Freelance Journalist, Author, "Fade: My Journeys in Multi-Racial America): Thanks for having me.

Mr. PAUL FOREMAN (Student, Pomona University): Hey, thanks for having me over.

MARTIN: Elliott, let me start with you. This is a complex question, which is obviously why you wrote a whole book about it. But as briefly as you can, you consider yourself multi-racial despite the fact that both of your parents are considered African-American in the U.S.? So why do you consider yourself multi-racial?

Mr. LEWIS: You know I like to say that my parents are multi-racial by birth, but black through life experience. Whereas I, on the other hand, am not only multi-racial by birth, I'm multi-racial through life

experience as well. In other words, there are certain defining moments in my life, that have pointed me down this path toward identifying as biracial as an adult. And those experiences are very different than a lot of the experiences that my parents had growing up that caused them to identify as black.

MARTIN: And one of the experiences that I think each of you has had is this question that just seems to come out of now where, which is, what are you? Fanshen, what do you say?

Ms. COX: I tend to answer for the day, for the moment that they ask me. Right now I'm calling myself black and white. In college I was black. In high school I was mixed. So it really depends on my mood for the day.

MARTIN: And Paul, what about you?

Mr. FOREMAN: Usually I say I'm black and white. If pressed further, I guess I talk about the fact that I'm also Russian-American. I'm still figuring out who to identify as, you know, I'm only 19 so I can't explain everything about who I am yet.

MARTIN: Does it bother you that you even have to have that conversation, Paul?

Mr. FOREMAN: It can be a little frustrating. It's strange having to sort of explain my entire family history when I'm asked a simple question, and I wish I had something more easy to identify as. Just to say, this is what I am.

Mr. LEWISH: And I think the ..

MARTIN: Elliott?

Mr. LEWIS: I think the question bothers a lot of multi-racial people because the reason, often times, it's being asked is not because of some innocent curiosity, but because the person asking the question is uncomfortable with their inability to classify us.

Mr. FOREMAN: Yes. Absolutely.

Mr. LEWIS: And so then they feel the need to ask the question to get it clarified in their own mind.

MARTIN: Go ahead Fanshen.

Ms. COX: Well, I was just going to say, I really see the question as an opportunity and that's what's behind having this festival. It's behind the podcast that I host called "Mixed Chicks Chat" and it's really- It's actually how we open the show with, what are you? Because we think it's important to share this story. Too many of us have been in a situation where we have either been forced to choose, or have not even been conscious of having chosen, and we're just saying, talk about it.

MARTIN: Elliott, you've - in your book, you talk about the history of race as a social construct and why this question is so fraught in this country. Could you just give a little bit of flavor of that?

Mr. LEWIS: Yeah, well, one of the chapters in my book is called, "The One Drop Suggestion" and most people probably know that as the one drop rule which was that historically, you know, if you'd had one drop of black blood you were considered black. That wasn't always the case all the time. I mean, if you look at various state laws, in some states, it was one eighth black blood made you black. Other states

one quarter black blood made you black. I found an interesting twist in a Virginia law that basically said if you were part black and part Native American that you could be considered Indian when on the reservation, but black when you left. So, I mean, there are all sorts of these weird definitions about who is black in our country.

MARTIN: And Fanshen, I wanted to ask you about this. I'm curious to what degree you think appearance dictates a certain identity?

Ms. COX: Sure. I think there's two things that we've really discovered throughout having these conversations. Appearance and location, where you grow up? Where you spend your time? My brother identifies as black, and that's because that's how people see him. That's how the police treat him. That's how, you know, taxi drivers treat him. Where is, I have, you know, light skin and blue eyes and have spent more time in areas where perhaps there's not as much racial separation, or segregation, and I'm more comfortable in being able to identify as mixed, or black and white.

MARTIN: Paul, what about you? Because you grew up on the east coast. You are attending college on the west coast? And I think it's OK to say your parents are two of my oldest friends, separately and together. And so, I'm interested, and you also have a brother, not to tell all your business, who looks very different from you?

Mr. FOREMAN: Yes.

MARTIN: Who far more resembles your mother. You far more resemble your dad, who's African-American. How do you think appearance plays into perception?

Mr. FOREMAN: For a long time I tried to convince myself that my identity has nothing to do with how someone else sees me. You know, I wanted to find it myself. But the reality is, how people see me is going to be part of me no matter what. With respect to my brother, one example is, we both went to public high school in Montgomery County for a year. And I couldn't handle it. I had to leave. My parents put me in private school. He stayed in public schools throughout high school.

The reason is because I found it much harder to be a student who is seen as black, but trying to excel academically. For instance, trying to dress the way I dress. Listen to the music I listen to. Whereas he has lighter skin, he has straighter hair, no one would ever say to him, you are trying to deny your blackness just because no one ever knew that he was black.

MARTIN: So, the fact that you both speak Russian. The fact that you both speak French. The fact that you both lived overseas in Russia for a couple of years was kind of, forgive me if I say, held against you. Whereas he didn't have to defend it?

Mr. FOREMAN: Yeah. Absolutely.

MARTIN: That's harsh. That's a little painful. Elliott, what about that with you? Have you ever had an experience like that where you've felt like you had to choose up sides in a way that wasn't very comfortable?

Mr. LEWIS: Yeah, one of my earliest experiences in the whole racial identity formation game came when I was somewhere between 10 and 12 years old and my mother, she comes from a large family of 10, so she was taking me over to introduce me to this one particular uncle, who was dark skinned. You know, when she introduced me, and said, you know, this is your uncle so-and-so. He looked at me,

didn't say a word and instead, turned to my mother and said, where did you get this white boy from?

And so that sent a message, you know, very early on that you are not black, or you are not all black, or you know, we certainly don't see you are all black as all the time. And when it comes from, you know, someone from within your family, that definitely has an impact on you going forward.

I would like to add one other factor into the mix, though, when we talk about how people identify, generation is a huge part of this. One of the interviews that I did for my book was with a psychologist who is the leading researcher in the country on this issue of identity formation in inter-racial families. What her studies have shown is that biracial baby boomers who are a black-white combination, let's say, are among the least likely to identify as biracial compared to generation X and generation Y biracials.

And it has to do with their close proximity to the Civil Rights era and the black power and the black pride movements of the 1960s and 70s and so you know, a lot of people ask me, you know, well why does Barack Obama identify as black as opposed to biracial? Well, Barack Obama was born in 1961. So, that makes him a boomer, and among that age group that tended to identify as black, even though they were by ancestry biracial. You look at somebody like Tiger Woods, on the other hand, who firmly embraces a multi-racial identity. Tiger was born in 1975. Two different generations and two different social undercurrents going on at the time of their upbringing.

MARTIN: We talked to the new - the incoming head of the NAACP who, we would describe as biracial. He has one parent who is considered black. One parent who is white. I said, well, gee, this is interesting. You are the first biracial president of the NAACP, to our knowledge, at least in the modern era. And he said, I don't understand what that means? I'm black. That's it. You think that's generational? Elliott? Or...

Mr. LEWIS: Sounds like it to me.

MARTIN: If you are just joining us, you are listening to Tell Me More from NPR News, and we are talking about biracial identity in America. And I'm speaking with Journalist Elliott Lewis, actress Fanshen Cox and international relations student, Paul Foreman. We'd also like to remind you that with Tell Me More the conversation never ends, so if you want to tell us your thoughts about biracial identity in America, you can go to our blog at npr.org/tellmemore or call our comment line at 202-642-2522. Fanshen, you wanted to say something?

Ms. COX: Yeah, it's interesting. I also had a sense that it was generational, in terms of how we identify. But we've been hearing from a lot of younger people who are still really strongly identifying as black, if they have at least one black parent. In college, when I was confronted with the what are you question by a black student, and actually asking me whether I would join the black student union, and I said, well, no, because I'm Jamaican and Scottish. And he said, you're black.

And it was something about the conversation we had there, and the impact of his words and also my father, who identifies strongly as a black man, that I suddenly felt a responsibility towards the black community. That suddenly I was accountable and that I needed to lend my voice, for example, to statistics that talk about the number of teenage black girls that get pregnant, and here I was going to college and grad school. Suddenly I felt this very strong responsibility, and I think that still very much carries on for younger generations.

MARTIN: That black folks need you, or need you more, maybe.

Ms. COX: Yes.

MARTIN: Yeah. I wanted to ask about Barack Obama and whether his important place in history has any special meaning to you. Paul?

Mr. FOREMAN: It's definitely more personal to me than any other political thing that's ever happened in my life, so, yeah.

MARTIN: One of the things that first got some attention about his identity was when a writer named Deborah Dickerson wrote that he's not really black, because he's not a son of the Diaspora. You know, his father's first-generation African, so his historical lineage did not come through slavery and the Middle Passage and caused a big hoo-ha. Did that register with you in any way? This question about is he black enough? Elliot?

Mr. LEWIS: Yeah, I think to phrase the question as, is he black enough, is the wrong phraseology to use. I mean, I think there is something worthy of discussion there, and that is that his story is not up from slavery. And so that when he is able to talk about his family background, his father's story is very much the American immigrant's story. So I've often wondered, sometimes, if by telling that story he is able to connect with certain white voters who also have the American immigrant experience as opposed to his history being up from slavery.

MARTIN: Can I ask you, though, if to the degree you feel comfortable saying, because I know you're a journalist and, you know, cover these things, does it have any special meaning to you as a person who identifies as multiracial, the nuance of it, that you think you might not feel if he were of a different lineage, different background?

Mr. LEWIS: Well, I think one of the things that has impressed me about how Senator Obama has handled these questions is that he is someone who clearly embraces his multiracial ancestry, while maintaining a black identity. Biracial, to me, is sort of an umbrella term that encompasses both black and white. It's not some third, other category, off on the sideline.

MARTIN: Do you think the way he talks about this gives you the space to claim that? Or you think it allows people to understand it in a way perhaps they did not? Or, maybe the culture was already there, and he's just captured what people already understand, that you can be both.

Ms. COX: It was not there. It was very much not there. Every time I replay his speech in Philadelphia, I cry. It's hard enough for me, for us, to still refer to him as the potential first black president. But the fact that we can talk about him in that way and he can refer to his parents and his background has not been done before, and it's beautiful.

Mr. LEWIS: I am, though, concerned about a trend that I have seen lately. And that is, you know, if you think back ten years ago, when Tiger Woods first won the Masters, and he said that he preferred to be identified as multiracial as opposed to just black, the guy was like vilified for that...

MARTIN: Yes. Well, but maybe that's because he's perceived as a cynical purveyor of identity. I mean, his first ad for American Express had to do with being, you know, denied access to certain courses because of his race. And so maybe it's him, as opposed to the narrative. I don't know.

Mr. LEWIS: I just think we were in a very different place, you know, ten years ago, in terms of how we thought about these questions of multiracial identity. One of the concerns that I have now is that, you

know, it used to be that if you identified as multiracial, people called upon you to defend that identity. And now I'm becoming concerned that we're entering into a time where you have people coming from interracial families who choose to identify with a single race, and they're being called upon to defend that. You know? And you know, we need to get to a place where, you know, we come to an understanding that identity formation, for those of us who grew up in interracial households, is a process. And this process unfolds gradually over time, and different people come to different conclusions.

Ms. COX: Yes. I just have to say, the important piece that we have lacked in the past is the communication of that.

LEWIS: Yes.

Ms. COX: That's all I'm saying, is that we need to talk about it. And so when he talks about it, it allows us to say, OK, at least the conversation is now open to talk about.

MARTIN: Paul, I wanted to get a final thought from you. How did your parents talk to you about race?

Mr. FOREMAN: One story that I keep hearing retold to everyone in my family these days is that, once when I was very little, I asked my mom, Mama, why does everyone in this family have different hair? And my parents took that opportunity, took many opportunities, to educate me about, first of all, the fact that I can define my identity as a multiracial person, as a black person, as a white person. It's nothing I should have to defend.

MARTIN: Fanshen, some final thoughts from you, I also want to hear briefly about the "Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival." Tell me a little bit about that.

Ms. COX: Yes. Very exciting.

MARTIN: And I want to know if you have children. Do you have children yet?

Ms. COX: I do not have children.

MARTIN: OK. But how do you think you'll talk about that, if you don't mind my asking?

Ms. COX: We'll talk about it. That is really, again, the ultimate goal behind the festival. And the "Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival" is this weekend. And my whole purpose for being at this point is to encourage people to talk. So my children will be tired of talking about it, probably.

MARTIN: Fanshen Cox is the host of the first "Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival." She joined us from NPR West. Journalist Elliot Lewis is the author of "Fade: My Journeys in Multiracial America." And Paul Foreman is a student at the University of Pomona in California. They were kind enough to join us in our Washington studio. Thank you all so much for speaking with us.

Ms. COX: Thank you so much.

Mr. LEWIS: Thank you.

Mr. FOREMAN: Thanks.

MARTIN: You can learn more about the Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival by going to npr.org and clicking on Tell Me More.

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