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So why isn't Obama white?

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In 1991, I visited El Paso, Texas, and while in the airport baggage claim, I disappeared. My bags were there, but I wasn't. It was broad daylight, and it was that season in west Texas where even at noon you're squinting into the sun. By then, I had lived in America for more than a decade, mostly in the South, and also in Boston, and Iowa City. But the prevalent skin tone in El Paso - on the border with Mexico, in land that once was Mexico - was such that, for the first time, I felt I had blended in. I'd disappeared.

I was surprised because I'd never given too much thought to standing out, or to disappearing until then. As someone born in Africa, but of Indian parents, I was clearly identifiable as foreign wherever I had lived in the United States prior to that. If my skin or accent didn't give it away, my use of "torch" for "flashlight" and "petrol" instead of "gas" did. Learning the rituals of possum pie and Friday night football made me a good ol' boy, but I still felt like a foreigner. It was only in El Paso in the baggage claim that the feeling vanished.

I stayed in El Paso for a long time. I liked being disappeared. I married in El Paso, and my youngest son was born there. Then, recently, after 16 years in Texas, I moved to Silicon Valley. In baggage claim at the San Jose Airport, I was surprised to see more South Asian faces than any other varieties. They - we - seemed to be everywhere. I suppose you could call this appearing - perhaps the next evolutionary stage after disappearing. Honestly, though, I'm still digesting this; I think I preferred disappearing to appearing.

But the other day, when we were listening to the radio, my 11-year old asked me, "So why isn't Obama white?"

Tristan is half-Hispanic and half-Indian (and the only reason that "Texas" is his middle name is because his mother swore she wouldn't let him into the world if I insisted it be his first name). Tristan's heritage doesn't make him automatically Indian or automatically Hispanic, and so he wanted to know why, when Barack Obama is half-black and half-white, he's described as black?

Please understand, my son isn't unaware of Obama's skin color, which is not that different from ours; he does know that black and white isn't about dermal pigmentation, but about a social and cultural divide that informs history, literature, health care, longevity and politics in America, though he might not phrase it quite that way. I'm ashamed to say that I had no answer for Tristan.

In tacitly accepting that Obama is potentially the first black president - as many a headline has now noted - it's as if, in my son's eyes, we have all conceded that the Jim Crow era one-drop rule still applies - a drop of black blood made you black. The only debates I've heard on this issue have been about Obama's blackness, not his whiteness. In his famous race speech,

Obama said, "some commentators have deemed me either 'too black' or 'not black enough.' " Garrison Keillor in Salon referred to him as a "skinny, young black guy, and this is going to be a problem for some folks."

Other than my son, I've yet to hear anyone suggest Obama is white. Or argue that he's not white. He is living proof of how this country can welcome immigrants - show me another country that suffers such pangs of conscience about its illegal immigrants, even if we have yet to do anything about that. Meanwhile, Piyush "Bobby" Jindal is the new governor of Louisiana and the first Indian American to ever hold such office, and he's been blessed by Rush Limbaugh, no less.

Obama, it appears, has "disappeared" in a good sense in whatever city or town he lands in. (Well, maybe not in parts of Pennsylvania.) We paint him the shade we choose - black or colorless. The Rev. Jeremiah Wright infamously on his podium tried to claim Obama, but in a way that endangered Obama's broad appeal. This is the senator's vulnerability: Your generic bird whistle gets labeled a turkey caller when a gobbler shows up.

Obama's candidacy, no matter the outcome, represents a great victory for our nation, just when we in America find ourselves losing (there's no other way to put it) economically, politically, militarily and in stature abroad. The son of a Kenyan father, facing off against a former Navy pilot, former POW - a brave, genuine, one-of-a-kind, American hero. "Hold your head up," I say to my son. "You're lucky enough to be born in the greatest country in the world."

Oh, but Sen. Obama, for my sake and for Tristan's sake, I'd like to hear you reject the label "black" if you don't also accept the label "white." I'd love you to shake his hand one day and say, "Tristan Texas, listen up: Booker T. Washington and Abraham Lincoln, Jack Kennedy and MLK - all of them are you and me." Because that's what I tell him, and I say, "Son, half this and half that makes you all American."

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