AN ACCOUNT OF A LIFE LIVED: HERBERT BLUMER REVISITED

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It’s official – my sister is black. It says so in the second paragraph of the autopsy report – “The body is that of a normally developed obese black female whose appearance is compatible with the recorded age of 41 years.” OK, the obese part we knew – but black? This finding was confirmed on her death certificate as well: there in black and white the word “Black” in the Race category. It’s ironic that my sister achieved in death what had eluded her in life: an official, unambiguous racial identity.

Biologically my sister was no doubt of mixed racial ancestry. Officially her birth certificate was silent on race, as it is for many adopted children. Socially she was reared as the adopted daughter of a European American father and a Japanese immigrant mother. My parents adopted both my brother and sister as infants. I am the youngest of the three and my parent’s only “natural” child. When my parents adopted my brother and sister all they knew was that they were getting “non-white” children. At that time (the late 1950s, and early 1960s), like today, the waiting period for adopting a white child was quite long. But, that didn’t matter to my parents. And in our household growing up, race wasn’t an issue that was much thought about. I was often puzzled when people would ask me how I felt about my siblings being adopted. I never knew how to respond. They were, after all, my siblings and I loved them as anyone loves a brother or sister. We were what we were: a normal, middle class family with an engineer father, a housewife mother, and three children. A Cleaver family, right? (Photo 1).

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But, as we were to find out in 1970, when my father changed occupations from engineer to country store owner and relocated us from a city to a small rural community in west Texas, we were far from normal. Life in small-town Texas was difficult – especially for my sister, Michelle. We had a litany of reasons for why this was. Michelle had developed faster than many girls her age so that although six years younger than my brother (and only 22 months older than myself), the two appeared to be the same age. So we put the harassment she received down to this, and to the fact that Michelle was a rebel. She was never one to “turn the other cheek”: the more she received, the more she would dish out. My parents were constantly being called to the school to hear about Michelle’s latest transgression and to bail her out of trouble (Photo 2).

Eventually, Michelle dropped out of school and left the local community. She didn’t stray far and problems seemed to follow her no matter where she went. First she went further west to another small Texas town. No luck there. Next she went east, to a somewhat larger, but still small Texas town. Again, no luck. “Michelle, come to Austin,” I urged – myself having found what I considered to be an oasis – a city so different from our hometown that I just knew Michelle would find the acceptance she was so seeking. After all, Austin had allowed me to escape somewhat the carefully defined social strictures that often characterize small towns. In Austin, our social background was unknown and thus the slate blank (or so I
naively believed). So, come, Michelle, come to Austin and experience this nirvana. Besides that, jobs are much more plentiful here than in the small, remote Texas towns.

And come she did. But as I myself was coming to realize, Michelle found this new nirvana a mixed bag. In this seeming oasis, unexpected questions about my own racial heritage were surfacing. I had never directly confronted this issue before – in our small town, my family was known and so was I. But I began encountering odd reactions to what I finally figured out was my Asian influenced physical appearance. People often spoke Spanish to me. I would respond, a little defensively, that I didn’t speak Spanish, only to see doubtful looks from persons who assumed that I was denying a Hispanic heritage. I found myself responding to pre-established categories that didn’t allow for the possibility of a person of my heritage and particular history. So much for the blank slate.

I also was struggling when it came to selecting “the box” – that box for racial category that is seemingly on almost every form you have to fill out. Was I white? Clearly, other people didn’t think so even though that’s what my birth certificate
Fig. 1. A Portion of my Birth Certificate.

implies (Fig. 1). I personally didn’t feel Asian; after all, other than having to take our shoes off before coming into the house (a practice not all that uncommon among non-Japanese households) Japanese customs weren’t really highlighted in our home; and, I didn’t like to define myself as “Other.” Nonetheless for lack of a better option, “Other” is generally what I selected.

As I was grappling with these issues, it crossed my mind that my siblings must also be encountering similar difficulties. So I asked Michelle “Michelle, what box do you select?” “Other,” she replied. She continued, “And on the line where you specify what ‘Other’ you are, I write ‘Human.’” Who can quibble with that?

Austin was in many ways no different than many other Texas locales. The local malls soon became off-limits for Michelle as she was forever being followed by in-store security. But her experiences weren’t all negative. It was after all in Austin that she learned that she had “the good hair.” Michelle, you see, had struggled all of her life with her tightly curled brown hair and was surprised to learn that to some persons, her hair–its texture and brown color–was greatly admired. “Good hair!” she proclaimed in surprise.

Gainful, long-term employment remained an on-going struggle for Michelle. She went from job to job searching for something that always seemed to elude
her. An excellent cook, she tried her hand at a number of culinary positions. But telemarketing is where she found her niche. She was so good on the telephone that she even got a job offer from a company strictly on the basis of her telephone interview. The offer was rescinded when she showed up for her first day of work. No explanation was offered.

Life has a funny way of coming full-circle and I have learned that there is some truth to the statement that you can never really escape your past. After Michelle’s sudden and unexpected death, I knew there would be a lot of curiosity about it in our small home town. Wishing to forestall having to deal with the inevitable speculation about her death, our family informed only a few people. But in a small town such news takes on its own life. True to form, it wasn’t long before our telephone began to ring. Fully expecting calls of concern and curiosity, we were, however, unprepared for one particular message that was delivered. That person was intent upon informing us of the “new cemetery by-laws.” How these by-laws could possibly prevent my sister from being buried in the cemetery next to our father in a clearly demarcated family plot was never explained to us. The issue was eventually dropped – or at least no longer directly mentioned to my family.

Someone recently commented to me that my parents must have been very progressive for their time for having adopted non-white babies. That label doesn’t fit our parents, at least not in the common political sense. My dad was strictly an all-American kind of guy who voted for Ross Perot in the last election in which he was alive. For him welfare was bad; self-sufficiency good. But late in life, he realized that the times, they were a-changing when he purchased what would be the last truck he would own – the all-American Chevy Luv made in Japan? Alas, it was true.

As we were back in our hometown for Michelle’s funeral and driving down Main Street, we passed several motels with marquees proclaiming “American Owned.” It crossed my mind that these proclamations were probably not intending to convey the broad sense of “American” that my father eventually realized in buying his “American” truck made in Japan; or that someone like my mother – a naturalized American with a heavy accent would be the proprietor; or not even that the proprietor would be African American (and I challenge anyone to claim a more uniquely American experience than those of African heritage). No, I concluded, the message here was probably that the proprietor was white.

In the more enlightened present, in transracial adoptions adoptive parents are urged to celebrate and acknowledge their child’s racial heritage. But what does it mean to be black, anyway? Baz Dreisinger (2003) in a recent article in Salon commented on the spate of articles on “passing” – that is, of black people who can pass for white. While it raises the question to why this is relevant in a supposedly colorblind society it doesn’t address the issue of those of us who are racially ambiguous yet assigned to a particular racial category nonetheless. Michelle was
fully aware of the multiple meanings her own appearance provoked among different groups in society. Indeed, it was Michelle’s ambiguous physical characteristics that allowed her to “pass” within several categories depending upon the overall composition of the group she was with – sometimes black, sometimes Hispanic – but as confirmed by the autopsy report itself, never white.

Nevertheless, does labeling someone black make them black? I am, I insist, as black as my sister. After all, having worked for the past eight years at a historically black university I know more than my sister ever did about black identity. But when it comes to the black experience (or at least those negative aspects of it) – my sister has me beat, hands down.

There is a highly vocal crowd who argues against transracial adoptions altogether. For example, while the National Association of Black Social Workers has considerably backed off their strong rhetoric against transracial adoptions, they still oppose the practice. And while on the one hand, my own biography almost guarantees that I must question this (and particularly the assumptions that undergird it) – on the other, if I am honest with myself, I too have to admit, painfully, that I fully understand, maybe better than most their opposition to transracial adoptions. Here, too, one needs look no further than my sister’s story.

Regardless, no matter how parents of transracial children deal with the race issue (either by treating it as a non-issue, as in my household, or celebrating it, as is done in other households), society has a way of putting those who dare think we may have transcended the racial categories of the past back in their place. I know I am not alone in the racially ambiguous category, but, in a sense, it is irrelevant in many circumstances, as we are labeled and sorted into categories not generally of our choosing and for which the consequences can be enormous. Indeed, we need look no further than the current practice of our government using this labeling technique to identify and detain a substantial number of dark-skinned people assumed to be of middle-eastern origin for “national security” purposes.

Herbert Blumer spoke of these very things almost 50 years ago. Blumer made the point that prejudice is more than negative stereotypes and negative feelings. Instead, “race prejudice presupposes, necessarily, that racially prejudiced individuals think of themselves as belonging to a given racial group (1958).” He continues, “the sense of group position is a general kind of orientation. It is a general feeling without being reducible to specific feelings like hatred, hostility or antipathy (1958).” Within this dominant group position, the color line “represents a positioning of whites and Negroes as abstract or generalized groups; it comes into play when members of the two races meet each other not on an individual basis but as representatives of their respective groups” (1965). Blumer further notes that as a way of maintaining their power position “whites adhere to the color line when and where the social code requires it applications” (1965).
And one such place that the social code requires the application of the color line is on "official" government documents such as autopsy reports, birth certificates and death certificates. Indeed, it is on these "official" statistics that demographers and actuaries spend their careers (and stake their reputations) analyzing. Few seem to call into question the validity of these official definitions with their declarations of "Black" and "White." This may be because, as Blumer notes, it is generally the dominant group (or their representatives), with its "first rights" to socially valued goods and resources who mainly assign these labels that extend to controlling even areas of intimacy and privacy (Fig. 2).

The intimate details of an autopsy report prepared by a coroner—a highly trained medical doctor who dissects and examines every aspect of a human body for the purpose of reaching an "official" determination of death—can be laid bare for anyone with a self-addressed stamped envelope to see. Clinical in tone, the medical examiner’s report attempts to objectify the intimate details revealed within. "The hairline is normal. The scalp hair is tightly curly, dark brown with a few gray strands and a maximum of 1\frac{1}{2} inch long... The eyes are closed... They are reported to be brown... There are no surgical incisions, scars or tattoos... The scalp, skull and dura are unremarkable (I’m offended on Michelle’s behalf)... The abdomen is protuberant and notable for striae." More battle scars revealed—evidence of Michelle’s hard-fought and life-long battle with excess weight (Fig. 3).

The most recent Census seemingly opened new territory in that it expanded and allowed for any number of racial/ethnic heritages to be delineated. Towards what end, I have yet to figure out, other than to appease people like myself who have never felt at home in the "Other" category. But in the end, it seems the only categories that really matter are White, Black and Other (Other meaning Not White but Not Black either).¹

Almost 50 years ago Blumer spoke of a color line; as 50 years before him, so too did W. E. B. DuBois. It seems we have entered another phase of race relations—or re-entered an old one—one of code words and by-laws and reminiscent of the past.
The post-mortem examination was performed by Elizabeth Peacock, M.D., Deputy Medical Examiner, at the request and authorization of Roberto J. Bayardo, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner, beginning at 10:00 a.m. on October 17, 2003, at the Travis County Forensic Center, Austin, Texas.

HISTORY:
The decedent was reportedly found naked unresponsive on the bathroom floor with two empty pill bottles (Xanax and aspirin). EMS was summoned and the decedent was transported to ER on October 16 @ 2234hrs.

EXTERNAL EXAMINATION:
No clothing or jewelry accompanies the body. The body is that of a normally developed obese black female whose appearance is compatible with the recorded age of 41 years. When unclothed, the body weighs 201 ½ pounds and is 69 inches long. Preservation is good in the absence of embalming. There is fixed posterior lividity of normal color and full rigidity of the extremities and jaw. The body is cool to touch, having been refrigerated prior to examination.

Fig. 3. A Portion of Michelle’s Autopsy Report.

when injustices were dismissed as being “all in the imagination” and especially hard to prove.

Some might want to dismiss Michelle’s story as exceptional. And perhaps having never had to directly confront the color line are in the privileged position that allows them to do so. But doesn’t that too reinforce Blumer’s point? Instead, I argue that her story isn’t unique. I posit that it’s much more common than people are comfortable acknowledging. To acknowledge that race remains an arbitrary designation based upon physical appearance in an era when nearly every introductory race and ethnicity textbook begins with the debate about whether we’re a melting pot or a tossed salad is discouraging to say the least. This, in the dawning of a new millennium, as 100 years before, the words of W. E. B. DuBois (1994) still ring disturbingly true:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the twentieth century. This meaning is not without interest to you, gentle reader; for the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line.
Fifty years after DuBois spoke of the color line, Blumer, more theoretically, reintroduced the subject with a more expansive frame of reference. In the intervening years since Blumer’s theoretical contributions, enormous changes have occurred in the very fabric of American society. Immigration and intermarriage has changed the complexion of the United States. And yet, in the midst of these tremendous changes, some things remain stubbornly the same. Here, in the dawning of the 21st century, it seems the color line remains an enduring legacy. And Michelle is classified as Black. I feel that I need to share this revelation with her because, in retrospect, it explains so much. But then, something tells me she probably had already figured it out.

NOTE

1. Interestingly, Ken Prewitt in his essay, “The Census Counts, The Census Classifies.” In: Foner & Frederickson’s (Eds), Not Just Black and White (2004), Prewitt portends the possible disappearance of the race/ethnicity variable from the Census questionnaire. However, he prefaces this prediction by noting that the disappearance of the racial category should not be confused with an end to race discrimination.

REFERENCES