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Democracy Dies in Darkness

A birth certificate masked my multiracial truth. For me and 33 million others, the 2020 Census asserts it.

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My face burned — whether with anger or shame, I wasn't sure. In 1994, I stood outside human resources at the CBS offices in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Studio City and listened to my future boss over the phone. You want the job? You need to complete the paperwork and check just *one* box, he insisted. Hours earlier, my pencil had marked X's in two boxes on the application form. One designated my race as White, the other Black. The HR representative had called him to intervene, and now she waited inside her office for my decision. In a split second, I decided. I wanted the job at CBS's flagship TV station in Los Angeles; it would be career-changing. So, though no one had told me which box to check, I had a feeling what the HR rep wanted. The recruiter who had first connected me with the opportunity had explicitly told me CBS was looking to increase diversity among its producer ranks. So I grabbed the pencil and erased the mark that declared me half-White. After all, I thought, no one — not even my own family — had officially told me I was of mixed race. The only evidence I had otherwise was written all over my face.

Decades later, when the "23andMe" response jumped into my email inbox at work, I stopped talking to colleagues mid-meeting to read the results. After years of looking at my pale reflection in the mirror and questioning my identity, I already knew the truth. When I walked out into the world, people looked at my fair skin and perceived and treated me as White. I sensed that the birth certificate that claimed I had the same father as my all-Black siblings was a lie, as was the story of my birth that my mother held on to until her death. Even my family's nickname for me, "High Yella," has been a signal to me that I was different from them. Now the results I read confirmed it: 56 percent European, 42 percent sub-Saharan African, with a fraction of East Asian and Indigenous American and other thrown in. I felt a sense of recognition. Science had validated who I was.

This month, I felt a similar sense of validation. After filling out the 2020 Census and checking the box to declare myself as two or more races, I saw the final results. My multiracial identity counts, and I'm far from being alone. According to the data, I'm among 33.8 million people who identify as multiracial, a whopping 276 percent increase since the 2010 Census. It's proof that the United States is truly a racial melting pot, with the most diverse population in its history.

But this new visibility means that I and people like me should no longer just allow others to place us in a category based on our skin tone, their perception of us or even their need to count us as a diversity hire.

We have grown tired of the pressure to claim one side of our heritage over another. The antiquated social and legal principle that one drop of blood determines if we're Black or that complexion, hair texture or facial features decides whether someone of mixed ancestry is more White, Asian or Latino has been harmful.

That's why blogs and Facebook groups devoted to conversations around multiracial identity buzzed with chatter after the release of the census results. We have long sensed the changing demographic trends in our country and seen the growing number of mixed-race people in our families, on the sidelines of our kids' soccer games and even in popular culture. We've just been waiting for the U.S. Census Bureau to join the increasing number of employers, college admissions offices and other entities that let people declare themselves outside of those binary check boxes.

We multiracial people also were the first to recognize that more people around us were more comfortable exploring and talking about their own individual diversity. The rise of genetic ancestry testing gave us a vehicle to do that. In fact, researchers have found that those who take these tests are then more likely to identify as multiracial.

Still, we understand that our mixed-race identity is a complex concept. "Multiracial" is not a fixed point. According to Maria P.P. Root, a clinical psychologist and educator, mixed-race people deserve the right to change their racial identification over time and based on different contexts. As an example, to the world, my skin looks white. I cannot change that. But if given the option on forms, I choose "two or more races." If not, I choose "Black," because I grew up in an all-Black family and feel that's my culture. Many other interracial families like mine fall on a spectrum where mixed-race children vary widely in shade and sometimes in professed identity. With interracial marriages continuing to climb in the U.S. — albeit in greater percentages in metro than rural areas — it will be more difficult for some people to tell social researchers they don't have a close friend of another race, when their own families are growing more diverse.

Our identity is not our only complexity. As a racial category, we may also be hard to pin down politically.

Because the census is used to determine political representation, political consultants already are starting to question whether multiracial Americans are a discrete constituency or just a complicating factor in determining the political leanings of a "minority" district with multiracial voters. It's easy to believe that multiracial people will have more liberal views. Data from the Pew Research Center does indicate multiracial voters lean more toward the Democratic than the Republican party. But that same data shows that younger mixed-race adults (the group that will grow over the years) are less likely to identify with either party.

Where we will likely have more singular influence is in the cultural conversations in our country. Over time, demographics will inevitably integrate more of our workplaces, places of worship, schools and social circles — bringing people into closer proximity with those who are multiracial or come from interracial families. It's in those places that our influence may be more pronounced. Our diverse backgrounds give us the opportunity and the obligation to speak out on some of the biggest social issues that divide us today, including systemic racism, immigration, economic inequality and police reform.

Though my light skin has meant that I've never feared for my life during a traffic stop, I have written and talked about the experiences of my Black siblings and cousins who experienced the dangers of driving while Black. Being multiracial doesn't necessarily give me any newfound credibility with people who don't understand the issue. Yet it does help me provide them with context. It's only a coin flip — the unknowable alchemy of genes — that keeps me safer from police while others are endangered. How much simpler, then, is it for me to explain the same concept to those White people who want to evolve in their thinking about police reform. Their genetic coin flip may have happened generations ago, but it's just by pure chance that their skin protects them.

It is the intersectionality of our identity that may allow us multiracial people to talk about the interconnectedness of one other and our shared responsibility around other issues. My adopted mixed-race daughter, for example, is vocal about racial injustice but just as passionate about her gay parents' rights and their personal interest in fighting antisemitism. She mixes easily with people from different races and cultures, who in turn influence her views on things like immigration, climate justice and other issues. While this is not unusual among younger people, I know that her identity as a mixed-race person gives her the opportunity to see the world from different angles. She tells me that some people see her as Black, some as mixed or White and some even as Latinx. It gives her a pass, sometimes into culturally different worlds.

Despite that, she is more confident in her identity, even more so than I was at her age. And so, when she took her own DNA test a few years ago, she shrugged when the results came back. She already knew who she was and understood her value and contributions in the world. Like so many of us, no data point was going to box her in to any corner.