

Obama's true colors are Black, White or neither?

By Jesse Washington
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A perplexing new chapter is unfolding in Barack Obama's racial saga: Many people insist that "the first Black president" is actually not Black.

Debate over whether to call this son of a White Kansan and a Black Kenyan biracial, African-American, mixed-race, half-and-half, multiracial — or, in Obama's own words, a "mutt" — has reached a crescendo since Obama's election shattered assumptions about race.

Obama has said, "I identify as African-American — that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed. I'm proud of it." In other words, the world gave Obama no choice but to be Black, and he was happy to oblige.

But the world has changed since the young Obama found his place in it.

Intermarriage and the decline of racism are dissolving ancient definitions. The candidate Obama, in achieving what many thought impossible, was treated differently from previous Black generations. And many White and mixed-race people now view President-elect Obama as something other than Black.

So what now for racial categories born of a time when those from far-off lands were property rather than people, or enemy instead of family?

"They're falling apart," said Marty Favor, a Dartmouth professor of African and African-American studies and author of the book "Authentic Blackness."

"In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois said the question of the 20th century is the question of the color line, which is a simplistic Black-White thing," said Favor, who is biracial. "This is the moment in the 21st century when we're stepping across that."

Rebecca Walker, a 38-year-old writer with light brown skin who is of Russian, African, Irish, Scottish and Native American descent, said she used to identify herself as "human," which upset people of all backgrounds. So she went back to multiracial or biracial, "but only because there has yet to be a way of breaking through the need to racially identify and be identi-

fied by the culture at large."

"Of course Obama is Black. And he's not Black, too," Walker said. "He's White, and he's not White, too. Obama is whatever people project onto him... he's a lot of things, and neither of them necessarily exclude the other."

But U.S. Rep. G. K. Butterfield, a Black man who by all appearances is White, feels differently.

Butterfield, 61, grew up in a prominent Black family in Wilson, N.C. Both of his parents had White forebears, "and those genes came together to produce me." He grew up on the Black side of town, led civil rights marches as a young man, and to this day goes out of his way to inform people that he is certainly not White.

Butterfield has made his choice; he says let Obama do the same.

"Obama has chosen the heritage he feels comfortable with," he said. "His physical appearance is Black. I don't know how he could have chosen to be any other race. Let's just say he decided to be White — people would have laughed at him."

"You are a product of your experience. I'm a U.S. congressman, and I feel some degree of discomfort when I'm in an all-White group. We don't have the same view of the world, our experiences have been different."

The entire issue balances precariously on the "one-drop" rule, which sprang from the slaveowner habit of dropping by the slave quarters and producing brown babies. One drop of Black blood meant that person, and his or her descendants, could never be a full citizen.

Today, the spectrum of skin tones among African-Americans — even those with two Black parents — is evidence of widespread White ancestry. Also, since Blacks were often light enough to pass for White, unknown numbers of White Americans today have Blacks hidden in their family trees.

One book, "Black People and their Place in World History," by Dr. Leroy Vaughn, even claims that five past presidents — Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge

— had Black ancestors, which would make Obama the sixth of his kind.

Mix in a few centuries' worth of Central, South and Native Americans, plus Asians, and untold millions of today's U.S. citizens need a DNA test to decipher their true colors. The melting pot is working.

Yet the world has never been confronted with such powerful evidence as Obama. So as soon as he was elected, the seeds of confusion began putting down roots.

"Let's not forget that he is not only the first African-American president, but the first biracial candidate. He was raised by a single White mother," a Fox News commentator said seven minutes after Obama was declared the winner.

"We do not have our first Black president," the author Christopher Hitchens said on the BBC program "Newsnight." "He is not Black. He is as Black as he is White."

A Doonesbury comic strip that ran the day after the election showed several soldiers celebrating.

"He's half-White, you know," says a White soldier.

"You must be so proud," responds another.

Pride is the center of racial identity, and some White people seem insulted by a perception that Obama is rejecting his White mother (even though her family was a centerpiece of his campaign image-making) or baffled by the notion that someone would choose to be Black instead of half-White.

"He can't be African-American. With race, White claims 50 percent of him and Black 50 percent of him. Half a loaf is better than no loaf at all," Ron Wilson of Plantation, Fla., wrote in a letter to the *Sun-Sentinel* newspaper.

Attempts to Whiten Obama leave a bitter taste for many African-Americans, who feel that at their moment of triumph, the rules are being changed to steal what once was deemed worthless — Blackness itself.

"For some people it's honestly confusion," said Favor, the Dartmouth professor.

"For others it's a ploy to sort of reclaim the presidency for Whiteness, as though

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Tuskegee Airmen earn invite to D.C. inaugural

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Tuskegee Airmen, who made history during World War II as the country's first Black military pilots only to return home to discrimination and exclusion from victory parades, have been invited to Barack Obama's inauguration.

"I want to come hopping, skipping and jumping!" said 92-year-old Spann Watson, an airman from Westbury, N.Y. who flew above Pennsylvania Avenue for President Truman's inauguration. "We had a part in changing these United States."

John L. Harrison Jr. an original airman now in his 80s, also said he plans to attend Barack Obama's inauguration.

"It makes us very very proud," said Harrison, of Philadelphia. "And it sort of compensates for a lot of the things that we had to endure in the early days."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., sent the invitation Tuesday to Tuskegee Airmen Inc. The Arlington, Va.-based organization represents 330 of the original pilots, whose ranks were once about 1,000. "We believe that it is appropriate to honor these members of the greatest generation who overcame enormous racial barriers to serve their nation," Feinstein said in a statement.

The Tuskegee Airmen were recruited into an Army Air Corps program that trained Blacks to fly and maintain combat aircraft. They trained as a segregated unit

at an air base in Tuskegee, Ala.

After fighting the Nazis, they returned home to face discrimination. Watson, the New York airman, said Blacks weren't allowed to participate in victory parades with other troops returning from Europe during World War II.

"We were excluded out of everything and hidden from everything," he said. "Now this time is our time, and to have a Black man as the elected president, this is indeed a turn in history."

Each member will receive two tickets to the Jan. 20 inauguration, and they have 10 days to decide if they will attend.

Carole Florman, a spokeswoman for the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, said the airmen's seating assignment has not been decided, but it will be within the ticketed viewing area around the U.S. Capitol.

Robert Rose, first vice president of Tuskegee Airmen, said he believes the last time the airmen were officially invited to an inauguration as a group was for Truman's swearing-in 1949. Rose, speaking from his home in Bellevue, Neb., said his local chapters are contacting airmen. Most are in their late 80s and early 90s, making travel difficult. The logistics involved, such as finding increasingly expensive and scarce hotel rooms, also prevent some from showing up.