

Beyond black and white: The Hawaiian president

by [Dwight Hopkins](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

Since the November presidential election, friends, colleagues and casual acquaintances throughout the United States and across the world have written me and claimed Barack Obama as the son of their state, race, country or region. Of course, countless black Americans have celebrated the fact that “in our life time, one of us is in the White House.”

How is it possible that Hawaii claims Obama as its own; Indonesia and parts of Asia perceive him as reflective of their experiences; Kenya cries in ecstasy to have a blood relative on 1600 Penn sylvania Avenue; all of Africa embraces him as a close kin of that continent; Kansans believe his roots sink deep within their soil; and black Americans, without much critical self-reflection, relish the idea that the 44th president is black like them?

The fact that Obama is perceived as belonging in a variety of ways to such disparate groups points up at least one persistent and absurd concept in race relations in America: the one-drop rule.

Coming out of slavery and segregation, the one-drop rule was one of the most egregious dimensions of white supremacy. When Africans arrived in the New World in chains, all of their children were called black and thus were enslaved, even if one biological parent was white. If it was determined that a person who looked white had any African or black ancestors, that white person was reclassified as black. A drop of black blood in one’s genealogy could instantly transform a white citizen into a black slave.

Long after slavery the one-drop rule persisted in racial classification, and oddly enough, was eventually accepted by black Americans. This led to all manner of absurdities. Walter White, a pioneering leader of the NAACP, was so white-looking that he once attended a high-society function where some of the whites present wondered why he had brought his “black” wife. The irony was that White was,

according to the one-drop rule, black, and his so-called black wife was actually white.

The one-drop-of-black-blood rule is unique to the U.S. It presupposes a black-white paradigm. On one extreme are “white” people, on the other, “black” people. Lost in these absolutes is the kaleidoscope of Asian Americans, Caribbean Americans, African Americans, Pacific Islander Americans, Latino-Hispanic Americans, Middle Eastern Americans, European Americans, American Indians and all the complexities of identity that make us unique human beings.

What race is Obama? Shortly after the election, the venerable John Lewis, a member of Congress from Georgia, stated that no black person who had come out of segregation and the civil rights movement could have been elected the first black president. And in fact Obama did not. Obama redefines what it means to be black. His ancestors did not come from the glorious West African empires of centuries ago. To my knowledge, he has no biological connection to those empires’ encounter with the European slave trade. His family history does not flow from de jure and de facto segregation. During the civil rights struggle, the black power movement and reparation efforts, he was living in Asia and the Pacific Islands. He has never lived in the (segregated or nonsegregated) southern U.S. In his major speeches, he has not mentioned two heroic icons of black manhood—Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. He was not born into nor did he grow up in a black church. He did not assemble black preachers and civil rights stalwarts together and from that base launch his presidential campaign.

Obama is Hawaiian. He is familiar with flip-flops, surfing, snorkeling, Aloha Spirit and ‘Ohana family values. Before he lived in Chicago’s segregated black community, his social reality was Asia and the Pacific more than the southern U.S. Born in Hawaii in 1961, he grew up alongside Japanese Hawaiians, Chinese Hawaiians, Filipino Hawaiians, Pacific Island Hawaiians, Native Hawaiians and white Hawaiians. The black-white paradigm of the mainland did not dominate his reality. In fact, whites were and still are a minority in Hawaii, and except for the occasional vacationer and military personnel, blacks were and are a rarity.

Obama spent ages six to ten in Indonesia, going to school and speaking Indonesian. His Indonesian stepfather gave him an ape as a pet. This pet was not caged but lived in their backyard.

Obama was nurtured in a white environment. His Kansan white mother (not from the South) reared him with the help of his white grandparents. (All accounts indicate that no black men or women, boys or girls ever lived in his home until he married and had his own children.) To illustrate how different his upbringing was from that of most black Americans, who call their grandmothers Big Mama, Ma Dear or Grandma, Obama's intimate name for his white grandmother was Toot—the Hawaiian endearment for grandmother.

Obama has never identified himself as an Afrocentric person or a pan-Africanist. Yet he is more African than the overwhelming majority of black Americans. There need be no genetic test to find out what West African "tribe" his ancestors came from centuries ago. His ancestry is from Kenya, a country in East Africa from which the enslaved rarely came. His father voluntarily came to the U.S. as a student in 1959. Before that, he was a goat herder in Kenya. President Obama has visited the exact location where his father and other ancestors were born. He understands the "tribal" language, politics, economics, religions, foods, songs, indigenous names, folktales, clothing, dances, illnesses, personalities and gravesites. When he pours libations (spilling liquids on the ground in memory of the dead), he is not talking about unknown Africans lost in the slave trade. Like Africans born on the continent, he can pour libations to his specific blood family members and directly on family gravesites. Some of those burial grounds are still next to family compounds in Kenya. Obama doesn't have to change his English "slave master's" name to an African one; his name is already African.

Growing up, Obama was certainly aware of the mainland's obsession with race. Witness the Afro hairstyle he adopted at Punahou, one of the most elite private schools in the U.S., and his idolizing of NBA star Julius "Dr. J" Erving. But it wasn't until he was 22 and came to the heavily segregated South Side of Chicago that, for the first time in a sustained manner, he engaged the particularities (and some might say the peculiarities) of traditional black-white race relations, including the one-drop rule.

Segregated Chicago offered Obama three things: a black family through marriage, a black community through grassroots organizing and a black church through baptism.

While black Americans may not be quite right in their declaration that Obama is only "one of us," the 44th president does symbolize a change in the U.S. If not going so far as to redefine race in America, Obama might expand what race means. Perhaps

he will help the millions of Americans with black and white parents, black and Asian parents and black and Latino/Hispanic parents integrate the various tuggings of their identities—identities that have been too often forced into narrow racial options.

Like all American citizens, this Hawaiian, Polynesian, Indonesian, Asian, white, Kenyan and black human being is caught up in the narrative of the black-white paradigm, a structure still rooted in the absurdity of the one-drop-of-black-blood rule. Yes, he is black. But no one can understand him deeply who does not appreciate the rainbow racial mixtures of his Hawaiian origins.