

A discussion about Yaba Blay's *One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*

Tim Koponen

"Is Blackness a matter of biology or consciousness? Who determines who is Black and who is not—the state, the society, or the individual? Who is Black, who is not, and who cares?"

In a very personal, but broad approach to the definition of race in America and beyond, Yaba Blay is straightforward about her goals and the issues she wishes to raise in her collection of personal stories and portraits of people of African descent from across the globe (but mostly from the United States).

"It is not my goal to tell people how to identify," writes Blay, a Drexel University professor.

"I am not the Blackness Whisperer, nor am I the Blackness Hunter. However, a person chooses to identify is just that — their choice. My aim here is to challenge narrow yet popular perceptions of what Blackness is and what Blackness looks like."

To do this, Blay tackles 70 different stories of people ranging in age from their 30s to centenarians. These folks reveal their own ways of adopting to and identifying with being in an ambiguous category: that of being "mixed", "biracial", "mulatto" or "light". After addressing the variety of ways modern African Americans choose to adopt their modern identity, she also turns to other racialized pockets of the globe, including Brazil and Africa to draw attention to the "rule" that drive racial division in the United States and elsewhere.

The "One Drop" rule is one created to push all mixed-race progeny of slaves into the "Black" category that was used to legitimate slavery itself. Although the history of its evolution is worthy (and has gotten) lengthy books on its own, sometimes with comparisons and sometimes not. Blay uses the American definition to pull on the mixing

of races in other places. She sometimes notes that there are systemic differences, as between the United States and Brazil, where there are many⁶ words for racial descent from Africa, many shades of physical “types” caught in those words, and a socio-economic “lightening” of people to the point where one family could be ascribed several names based on appearance, demeanor, and class presentation.

Within the 70 essays, while the majority of those contributors reside in the United States, others are from Cuba, Brazil, the Netherlands, Germany, and other nations where Americans might overlook other experiences of colorism and racial hierarchy. Most are relatively educated and professional as one would expect in a snowball sample of a college professor. All have spent time to reflect on their own reactions to the events and experiences, intimate and public, that shape their own declaration of racial identity.

While the scope and familiarity of her subjects is revealing, Blay spends more time declaring the how of things that exist rather than the why. In my experience, there are two tracks of racial societal norms that lead to this identity. The first is the institutionalization through religious, economic and political means to define racial boundaries and characteristics. The needs for cheap labor, or for those who do the dirty work are separated socially from the pure (this is explicit in the maintenance of “caste” in strict Hindu practices. These folks become associated with the dirt they work with, and then miscegenation boundaries are set up around the “other”, or inferiorized / minority group and the one which has the power to impose such boundaries upon them.

In Paulo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we can see how this becomes the social rules around which everyone's identity is drawn. Friere notes that when the oppressed are faced with having to identify themselves, they must first examine and act out their oppressor's ideals.

The second set of experiences are much less institutional and defined by social interaction across racial boundaries and within racial groups. These interactional experiences are often radically changed to fit into neat institutional categories. Acts of kindness, solidarity and affiliation gnaw at the lines of race difference and miscegenation. This is true as racial expressions of ethnic and sectarian differences as it is in formally or legally racialized societies.

Blay's subjects are literally too modern, too savvy for the most part and too "other of the other" to slip silently into majority-based identities. Most of the essays talk of contradiction or sublimation of the actual institutional rules. I assume because the reaching across miscegenation boundaries is acted out in the very existence of the subject.

She's chosen those who fit into the One Drop rule of blackness, but also who experience the life on the edges of racial purity and distinction. What we are given, without much fanfare, is a cavalcade of responses to the ambiguous status of breaking all but the most arcane (and unenforceable) racial miscegenation boundaries (One Drop). In all racialized societies, the beginning of the end for racialism to thrive and control outcomes for large groups, is that the miscegenation rules must be upheld, and those who violate the specific

miscegenation rule(s) must either be radically recategorized (as people of African and European descent were recategorized in much of colonial Africa as “coloured”).

It is this boundary walking that gives the book its power. It is not a revelation in itself about how race works and how it continues to worry and feed on social relations. But it is in walking the boundary *between* races, and the recognition of that boundary which has been crossed, that these stories provoke and give depth to discussions about race in modern society.

As you read the short identity autobiographies, I ask that you examine two things. First, the breadth of situation that leads to similar questions throughout. The great variety of circumstances that lead to asking about racial identity tend to show the power and ubiquity of racial typing across the globe. Second, as the portraits suggest and possibly demand, look into the eyes of each of our interlocutors. It is there that you see the personal experiences that lead to this particular answer to that universal question. That is a launch point for understanding both how race works, and how to eclipse it with a more humane and decent social structure.