

Why I am Still Black: I Have No Desire to Be Anything Else*

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It is a question for so many of us – what we should call ourselves. I have continued to call myself black.

I don't perceive a need to be otherwise.

Most American blacks agree with me, according to a new poll from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. Only 15 percent of persons interviewed chose "African-America" as a preferred designation, while 72 percent preferred "black."

I am very much aware of what kind of victory it was in the 1960s when I became black. I hadn't been black before that, you see. Before then, I was Negro. And when I became black, it was in the context of crying out, "Black is beautiful." I became black in the context of calling for, demanding, black pride. When I became black, I became black for good. It was a liberating experience.

Ambivalence about the question of color in America has deep roots. That is why much debate surrounds the 1896 language of Supreme Court Justice John M. Harlan, who said, "The Constitution is color blind." Today some people say that this language is mere conservative rhetoric, code words for a new racism. They say it means denying a voice to black people, denying access to governmental remedies for past deprivations.

This is not what Harlan meant. He had never heard of affirmative action. His dissenting opinion to the "separate but equal" Supreme Court decision, in fact, amounted to a frank and generous embrace of color unlike any we can find in our history theretofore. While speaking of color blindness, Harlan wrote about "black people," not like the majority, about "colored people." Harlan could see black without seeing a problem.

That is the point we are still trying to make. We need to live in a land where the expression "black" is not a symbol for tensions, nor a code word for deprivations and other kinds of social disorders; where, in fact, it is nothing other than full recognition of the humanity of our fellows. We know that we Americans appear differently one from another. We all have a look. There is nothing to be gained by substituting for our look some other name. Identifying with other folk outside the United States is not going to resolve for us the problem in coming to terms with who we are, where we are.

We've discovered something invaluable in these United States. We've discovered how to defend the claim of humanity. Our task now is to accomplish that defense, which we shall not do until we shall have assured the victory of knowing that we live in a world, in a country, where people can see black, white, and anything at all, without seeing a problem. Then people will refer to color precisely because color is no longer an issue. I will remain black, because I insist on being all-American.

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