THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Kamala Harris is Asian and Black. That shouldn't be confusing in 2020 – but it is to some.

Questions about what constitutes Blackness aren't new. Black people's ability to answer those questions for themselves is.

President Barack Obama with California Attorney General Kamala Harris, in 2012.

Paul Chinn / San Francisco Chronicle/Getty Images file

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By Nadra Nittle, cultural critic

During her 2020 presidential campaign, Sen. Kamala Harris, D-Calif., found herself at the center of a controversy about which Americans can claim to be Black, or Black enough – because of both her biracial identity and her immigrant parents.

Born to a Jamaican father and an Indian mother, Harris was subject to a smear campaign insinuating that she was not Black at all – which began anew immediately after presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden announced she was his pick for the vice presidential nomination. After a July 2019 debate, critics took issue with her for discussing a topic they viewed to be most relevant to American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) – busing to racially integrate schools. Although Harris was bused to a majority white school in California as part of a desegregation campaign, her lineage didn't include enslaved African Americans, the group such efforts targeted, her detractors argued. (Harris' father, Donald, wrote in 2018 that his research suggests he and his daughters are descended from Black people enslaved in Jamaica.)

How Kamala Harris went from prosecutor to vice presidential candidate

To have her Blackness questioned in this way must've been jarring for a woman who graduated from the historically Black Howard University, was born in Oakland, California – hometown of the Black Panther Party – and has likely been viewed as Black by a majority white society.

But the questions about what constitutes Blackness aren't new.

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When he ran for president, Barack Obama also faced questions about his racial identity, having grown up outside the continental United States without his Kenyan father. And when he identified as solely Black on the 2010 census form, some mixed-race activists openly expressed their disappointment with his decision to exclude his white heritage – even though he did not have the option to identify as biracial until a decade before, in the 2000 census, which took place well into his adulthood (and three years after he had begun serving in the Illinois state Senate).

Until 2000, the federal government hadn't allowed members of the public to identify as two or more races on the census. For most of the 20th century, Americans either had to pick one race or "other," a shift from even the late 1800s when the census included "racial designations for people with fractions of African ancestry."

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After the 2000 census gave mixed-race people more options, civil rights groups for African Americans and Asian Americans challenged the move, fearing the voting power of people of color would be diluted if the multiracial category reduced their counted populations during the

congressional apportionment process. But it was already evident that multiracial people were increasingly choosing not to identify as any one race: Two million Americans selected the "other" category on the 1990 census.

It was for that reason that multiracial activists had spent the next decade campaigning for the government to allow for multiple racial identities on the census form – and succeeded.

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The multiracial option isn't the only way that the census, which also included the term African American for the first time in 2000, will have complicated Black identity. Black people from immigrant backgrounds may now specify their ethnic origins on the 2020 census, which owes a debt to the same campaign two decades ago to differentiate the types of Blackness in America.

The change coincides with the rise of the ADOS movement, which seeks to prioritize the socio-political goals of African Americans whose families have lived in the United States for generations, rather than their counterparts whose families arrived recently and voluntarily. Black immigrants to the United States enjoy higher household incomes and rates of educational attainment than U.S.-born African Americans, a trend that gets overlooked when the Black experience is universalized. (However, some Black immigrants, such as Afro-Latinos, are speaking up about the marginalization they face in society.)

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The ADOS concept includes supporters as wide-ranging as Harvard philosophy professor Cornel West, who has said that it is giving working-class Black people a voice, and white conservative political commentator Ann Coulter. But the movement has many detractors, some of whom view it as divisive at best and xenophobic at worst. Others have argued that it ignores the long history of African Americans with immigrant roots, including black nationalist Marcus Garvey, who was Jamaican, and Nation of Islam leader Malcolm X, whose mother was Grenadian.

Similarly, the idea that multiracial people are distinct from other Black people overlooks the history of mixed-race civil rights activists such as Homer Plessy, Walter Francis White, Adam Clayton Powell and Diane Nash, all of whom could've "passed" for white.

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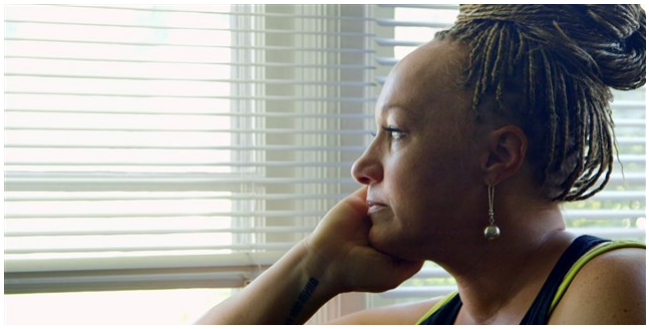

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Still, 20 years into the movement to allow mixed-race Americans to acknowledge their differentiation from Black Americans, the multiracial demographic is one of the fastest-growing groups in this country. And it's fair to say that the oldest Gen Zers and the youngest millennials are unfamiliar with a society that deemed someone wholly Black – and nothing else – for having a trace of African ancestry.

Today, it's not uncommon for young people with two Black parents to view themselves as completely distinct from those with just one – hence, the outcry that the new show "BlackAF" didn't exclusively star actors with two Black parents, or the recent charges of anti-black racism leveled at the biracial rapper Doja Cat.

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And Meghan Markle – born to a black mother and a white father exactly 20 years after Obama – has consistently identified as biracial, reinforcing the generational divide in perceptions of Black identity.

Or take singer-songwriter Kehlani, who has white, black and Native American ancestry: In May, she give fans permission on Twitter to call her "mixed." For a multiracial woman, that's not exactly a groundbreaking announcement, but the reasons she gave for doing so reflect a shift in how black identity is viewed today. The 25-year-old R&B star explained the importance of recognizing that she does "not face the same issues as black women w 2 black parents" and that to suggest otherwise perpetuates the erasure of these women.

Generations ago, when the archaic one-drop rule – which declared that a drop of African blood made one Black – still shaped African American identity, these discussions about authentic representations of Blackness weren't as likely to occur. In 1982, Susie Guillory Phipps, who didn't realize until adulthood that she was 3/32nds Black under the law, fought the state of Louisiana to have the race listed on her birth certificate changed from "colored" to white. She lost, and the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

As recently as the 1990s, mixed-race people were typically encouraged to identify – or simply identified in society – as Black, even if they looked racially ambiguous (see: Mariah Carey). And it

was considered laughable, if not unthinkable, that a darker-skinned multiracial person would reject the Black category in favor of identifying as multiracial. Golf star Tiger Woods is a case in point: In 1997, he was widely ridiculed for saying that he didn't consider himself as Black but "cablinasian," a portmanteau of Caucasian, Black, Indian and Asian, representing the entirety of his racial background.

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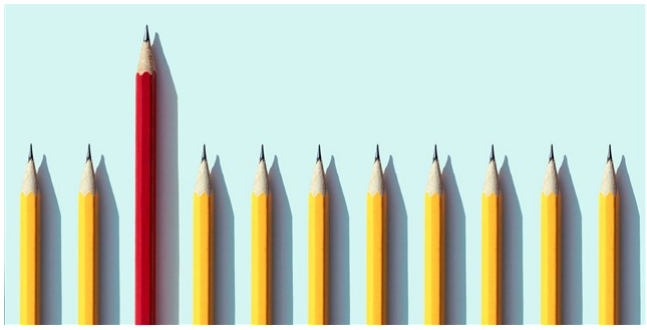

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Just three years later, Woods and other mixed people who didn't want to be boxed into one racial category would be vindicated by the census. And today, Blasian is an acceptable way for people of mixed Asian and Black heritage to refer to themselves.

Unbound by the one-drop rule or even by the broad term African American, Black people in the United States have more freedom than ever to identify themselves as they choose. For some, that means not describing themselves as solely Black; for others, that means specifying their ethnic origins, embracing the ADOS label or taking none at all. Each choice is potentially controversial – but more important than how any one person identifies is that Blackness in this country has long been nuanced, and always will be.

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