

Mixed Race, Mixed Blessing?

Saturday, 01 May 2010

Written by Oona King

WHITE supremacy is so last century. These days it's on-trend to be a mixed-race supremacist. Unlike the BNP, mixed-race people can now point to an assortment of scientifically credible research that claims biological advantages to being mixed race. And that's not to mention the anecdotal evidence citing young celebrities like Lewis Hamilton, Theo Walcott and Leona Lewis to prove the theory that mixed race people are healthier and prettier. If you spent your childhood being called a mongrel in the playground, the latest batch of research from Cardiff University's School of Psychology may bring a smile to your face.

But is this just a media fad, sparked by the presidential election of the world's most famous mixed-race person? And now that mixed-race people are our fastest growing ethnic group, what does it mean for Britain's uneasy relationship with race? Being mixed race is a mixed blessing. Growing up I was aware of the downsides, which ranged on occasion from a mild feeling of not belonging, to an innate understanding of what it is to be an outcast. But as an adult I've mainly experienced the upsides: a cultural bilingualism that can be beneficial in much the same way as speaking two languages. Sometimes it's like being in those fairy tales with an invisible cloak. Depending on my clothes and how I wear my hair, I've had natives of Spain, India, Brazil, Morocco, Mali, Jamaica, Libya, Cuba, Bangladesh, Iraq and Nicaragua all mistake me for one of them. It's as if mixed-race looks are the average sum of human genetics. And now it seems that mixed race genes are being hailed as the latest Darwinian "must-have" accessory. Dr Michael Lewis, who conducted the Cardiff research said: "Darwin suggested that diversity of genes led to greater genetic fitness and this in turn seems to be linked to attractiveness." In a recent Channel 4 documentary, geneticist Aarathi Prasad found convincing evidence that will disturb the BNP who elevate the need for racial purity. According to many scientists today, far from being an abomination of the natural order, mixed-race children may enjoy biologically advantages. The logic is that the wider the gene pool (the further apart two parents are genetically) the greater protection from illness or genetic abnormality their children enjoy. I don't know about being healthier and prettier (I've got a lousy immune system, and without make-up I can wake the dead), but some advantages to being mixed race are undeniable. I have wandered, as if by magic, through situations that others, white or black, would have found perilous. The most remarkable hour of my life came when I put on a head scarf and went out alone to witness riots on the 'Arab street' in the the Gaza Strip in June 2003. If the thousands of young enraged Palestinians had known I was a Jew with an American and British passport, and a Member of the British Parliament to boot, at best they would have kidnapped me, at worst killed me on the spot. Instead I watched them undisturbed from a few yards as they burned American and Israeli flags. And that, for me, is what's truly remarkable about being mixed race: every now and then you can transcend identity, and fluidly move from one to the next. In other words, you can be anything you want. It wasn't always like that. I was born in Sheffield in 1967 to an African-American father and a white Jewish Geordie mother whose family was Irish, Scottish and Hungarian. Before 1967 it was illegal in many American states for blacks and whites to marry. It can't have been great to be mixed race (or black) in the 1960s, let alone the 1860s. I wonder what things were like for my black great-grandfather Allen, born exactly a century before me in 1867 in the American South, just two years after the Thirteenth Amendment officially abolished slavery. His father Horace was black, and his mother, my great great grandmother Eliza, is listed in the 1870 US Federal Census as 'mulatto' (mixed race). Both Horace and Eliza were slaves until their forties, the age I am now. I like to imagine what Horace and Eliza would make of a black man in the White House. It would presumably stupefy them. Although I almost take it for granted now, at the time it stupefied me. On the morning of Obama's victory, when my three year old son asked me why I was crying, I had to stop myself saying 'because a black man has become President'. I didn't want to taint his 21st century mind with my 20th century mindset that found it impossible to believe a black person could become President. And yet even in 2010 the fact that Obama is black and mixed race remains controversial. His decision a few weeks ago to choose the 'black' box to describe himself in this year's Federal Census, rather than the 'mixed' box, has some groups up in arms. Why, they want to know, is he denying that he has a white parent as well as a black parent? After all, in his memoirs he says of his white mother 'she was the kindest, most generous spirit I have ever known, and what is best in me I owe to her.' If his experience of being a mixed race child with a white mother was anything like mine, the answer lies in the fact that no one, including his mother, could change the way the outside world perceived him. That's why most mixed-race people of my generation, the ones labelled mongrel in the playground, see themselves as black. The way we were perceived as black children(our environment) has shaped who we are, regardless of our genes. In this respect, we could not be anything we wanted to be, and there was no invisible cloak to hide our shame. As a 13 year old girl, for instance, I vividly recall being shunned by every white boy in the class (only 3 weren't white). I knew for a fact I would never go out with the white boys, simply because I was black. One of them told me this to my face, and the others didn't have to; even in liberal "multicultural" North London there was a clear, unwritten caste system that placed me in the less desirable 'black kids group'. Going back a couple of hundred years to my great great grandparents, their lives illustrate a common history more starkly than anything I've experienced. One was black and one was mixed race, but both were slaves. Genes are all very well, but on their own they can't trump environment. This was the conclusion of the Channel 4 documentary "Is it better to be mixed race?" Yes, some scientists may think mixed race children have a genetic advantage, but environment is often dominant. That's why becoming belatedly "fashionable" doesn't change anything for my generation of mixed race people. But it changes everything for the younger generations, because it changes their environment. They won't have a chip on their shoulder from being outcast. If anything, their challenges will be to avoid arrogance and a sense of entitlement. No one could accuse the pre-scandal Tiger Woods of having low esteem, often a classic mixed-race trait. Our new fashionability may also change something for Britain. The growing numbers of mixed race children may reduce anxiety around Britain's relationship with race. We have the highest rate of inter-racial marriage in

Western Europe. Younger British people of all backgrounds are more relaxed about race. And even people who are dead set against "the browning of Britain" seem to get used to it. My white granddad was devastated when his daughter married a black man, and when I was 6 weeks old my gran whispered to a neighbour "I hope she won't get any darker." But both became devoted grandparents and literally on occasion waved a fist at racists we encountered, forgetting that only a few years earlier they'd shared those same views. And what if it's finally proved beyond doubt that, on average, mixed race people are more attractive? Ironically this could be disastrous - both on our relation with the rest of the black community, and perhaps more importantly, with ourselves. Throughout history, those who think they are physically superior to others inevitably become morally inferior. We should heed Martin Luther King's dream that judgement rests on character, not looks or skin colour. It might make us smile to read recent claims that "mixed-race is the perfect face". But it won't make us happy. If anything, this fad for mixed-race supremacy could taint mixed-race people with a very ugly streak. And call me prejudiced, but I don't want to get lumped in with the BNP.,