

Why Race Isn't as 'Black' and 'White' as We Think

By BRENT STAPLES (NYT) 960 words Published: October 31, 2005 *New York Times*

People have occasionally asked me how a black person came by a "white" name like Brent Staples. One letter writer ridiculed it as "an anchorman's name" and accused me of making it up. For the record, it's a British name -- and the one my parents gave me. "Staples" probably arrived in my family's ancestral home in Virginia four centuries ago with the British settlers.

The earliest person with that name we've found -- Richard Staples -- was hacked to death by Powhatan Indians not far from Jamestown in 1622. The name moved into the 18th century with Virginians like John Staples, a white surveyor who worked in Thomas Jefferson's home county, Albemarle, not far from the area where my family was enslaved.

The black John Staples who married my paternal great-great-grandmother just after Emancipation -- and became the stepfather of her children -- could easily have been a Staples family slave. The transplanted Britons who had owned both sides of my family had given us more than a preference for British names. They had also given us their DNA. In what was an almost everyday occurrence at the time, my great-great-grandmothers on both sides gave birth to children fathered by white slave masters.

I've known all this for a long time, and was not surprised by the results of a genetic screening performed by DNAPrint Genomics, a company that traces ancestral origins to far-flung parts of the globe. A little more than half of my genetic material came from sub-Saharan Africa -- common for people who regard themselves as black -- with slightly more than a quarter from Europe.

The result that knocked me off my chair showed that one-fifth of my ancestry is Asian. Poring over the charts and statistics, I said out loud, "This has got to be a mistake."

That's a common response among people who are tested. Ostensibly white people who always thought of themselves as 100 percent European find they have substantial African ancestry. People who regard themselves as black sometimes discover that the African ancestry is a minority portion of their DNA.

These results are forcing people to re-examine the arbitrary calculations our culture uses to decide who is "white" and who is "black."

As with many things racial, this story begins in the slave-era South, where sex among slaves, masters and mistresses got started as soon as the first slave ship sailed into Jamestown Harbor in 1619. By the time of the American Revolution, there was a visible class of light-skinned black people who no longer looked or sounded African. Free mulattos, emancipated by guilt-ridden fathers, may have accounted for up to three-quarters of the tiny free-black population before the Revolution.

By the eve of the Civil War, the swarming numbers of mixed-race slaves on Southern plantations had become a source of constant anguish to planters' wives, who knew quite well where those racially ambiguous children were coming from.

Faced with widespread fear that racial distinctions were losing significance, the South decided to define the problem away. People with any ascertainable black ancestry at all were defined as black under the law and stripped of basic rights. The "one drop" laws defined as black even people who were blond and blue-eyed and appeared white.

Black people snickered among themselves and worked to subvert segregation at every turn. Thanks to white ancestry spread throughout the black community, nearly every family knew of someone born black who successfully passed as white to get access to jobs, housing and public accommodations that were reserved for white people only. Black people who were not quite light enough to slip undetected into white society billed themselves as Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, South Asian, Native American -- you name it. These defectors often married into ostensibly white families at a time when interracial marriage was either illegal or socially stigmatized.

Those of us who grew up in the 1950's and 60's read black-owned magazines and newspapers that praised the racial defectors as pioneers while mocking white society for failing to detect them. A comic newspaper column by the poet Langston Hughes -- titled "Why Not Fool Our White Folks?" -- typified the black community's sense of smugness about knowing the real racial score. In keeping with this history, many black people I know find it funny when supposedly white Americans profess shock at the emergence of blackness in the family tree. But genetic testing holds plenty of surprises for black folks, too.

Which brings me back to my Asian ancestry. It comes as a surprise, given that my family's oral histories contain not a single person who is described as Asian. More testing on other family members should clarify the issue, but for now, I can only guess. This ancestry could well have come through a 19th-century ancestor who was incorrectly described as Indian, often a catchall category at the time.

The test results underscore what anthropologists have said for eons: racial distinctions as applied in this country are social categories and not scientific concepts. In addition, those categories draw hard, sharp distinctions among groups of people who are more alike than they are different. The ultimate point is that none of us really know who we are, ancestrally speaking. All we ever really know is what our parents and grandparents have told us.