

“Why Don’t Blacks Disappear from the United States?”

Black Americans often complain about racist conditions in the United States. Scholars have shown consistently that these are not vacuous claims. Therefore, given the wherewithal to do so, “Why don’t Black Americans simply up and disappear from the United States?” You might think I am hinting at emigrating to Africa or elsewhere, but you’re wrong. In this case, I am referring to a simple concept of changing designations.

Based on a search of the *U.S. Code*, I have been unable to determine where “race” is defined in the non-repealed portion of U.S. laws. This raises the questions: “How is one designated ‘Black’ or ‘White’?” “Who designates one as ‘Black’ or ‘White’?”

The short answer to the “how” is that, in most cases, “blackness” is determined by an observation of skin color. However, many residents of the United States with black skin have an official designation as “White.”

On the “who” of it, in the past, medical personnel were charged with indicating race on birth certificates; however, this practice has been discontinued. Therefore, the main source of race identification is the individual. Given culture and conditioning, individuals designate themselves as “Black” or “White.” The U.S. Census Bureau is a primary source of aggregated information about who is “Black” or “White” in America, and individuals freely provide such information when the census is taken every ten years. Moreover, most persons volunteer information about their “race” on myriad forms when applying for a driver’s license or when applying for a loan, for other types of credit, or to attend college.

“Race” is a funny thing. The great Black scholar J. A. Roger proclaimed that there is only one race—the human race. If the preceding statement is true, and if we come to comprehend racial designations as a mechanism to distinguish between humans, then we must ask, “Why are such distinctions required?” In the case of Black Americans, racial distinctions have primarily produced adverse outcomes.

Hence we are led to the question: “What would happen if Black Americans designated themselves as White?” Let’s ignore for argument sake all of the very good reasons not to relinquish “blackness.” Let us simply consider the benefits that would accrue if a Black person flipped the switch and became White?

Your immediate response might be, “One cannot hide from one’s color.” Wrong! Today’s technological world permits each of us to perform many economic and social transactions without showing our skin color. We purchase products and file applications for loans online. Unfortunately, the economic literature is replete with studies that show that Blacks are discriminated against when it comes to purchases and loans. Is it not in Black’s best interest to be White for these purposes? Isn’t it a good economic practice to optimize outcomes?

This is not to suggest that one can adopt “whiteness” for all occasions. When one must transact business in person, then it is impossible to not disclose one’s color. In addition, certain urban areas are designated as “black”; therefore, if one resides in these areas, it may be difficult to claim “whiteness”. But for those occasions when face-to-face transactions are not required, why not select “whiteness” and receive the benefits?

Is this unethical or illegal? No! What is unethical about making an effort to enhance one’s life outcomes by choosing race selectively? Who is harmed by such action? Only the racist who wishes to use race as a tool to discriminate. Isn’t it the racist who is unethical and who commits the crime?

If race is such an important legal factor, why isn’t there a precise definition for it in the law? Have you ever heard of anyone being arrested because they claimed “blackness” or “whiteness” when their skin color indicated otherwise? If “race” truly does not exist, then what crime is committed by choosing one’s race selectively?

In the world of today and tomorrow, individuals use “avatars” (electronic images) on the Internet to represent themselves in various settings: One avatar is used for one occasion, and a different avatar is used for another occasion. This practice is no different than selecting “whiteness” for one occasion and “blackness” for another.

Cornell West is correct; “race matters.” But it shouldn’t. Therefore, it is good news to know that our changing world is providing increasing opportunities to prevent race and racism from causing harm to Black Americans.

Think about it. Shouldn’t Black Americans disappear and reappear when it is in their best interest to do so?

B.B. Robinson, Ph.D.
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