



cablinasian like me

TIGER WOODS' REJECTION OF ORTHODOX RACIAL CLASSIFICATIONS POINTS THE WAY TO A FUTURE WHERE RACE WILL NO LONGER DEFINE US.

BY GARY KAMIYA

it was one of those peculiar, almost farcical moments that occasionally arise in the turgid melodrama of American racial politics. After Tiger Woods won the Masters Tournament, the media went into a veritable orgy of racial sentimentality. The 21-year-old golf phenom was touted as the Great Black Hope, the putter-wielding equivalent of Martin Luther King Jr. Pundits waxed poetic about the cosmic social significance of Woods' feat, and those treacly "I am Tiger Woods" ads seemed to gain complete control of

the airwaves. Coinciding with the 50th anniversary celebrations of Jackie Robinson's breaking of baseball's color line -- an event of unimaginably greater significance -- Woods' coronation as the Black Prince of the Country Club gave America a chance to engage in its favorite ritual, the recitation of warm (if not Fuzzy) racial platitudes. While blacks celebrated the triumph of one of their own in a lily-white sport, whites wiped away tears and congratulated themselves on their remarkable progress. The choreographed racial minuet was proceeding as smoothly as a 30-second Nike spot.

And then Tiger Woods said he wasn't actually "black" at all -- he was "Cablinasian."

Woods made his remarks on "Oprah," when he was asked if it bothered him to be called an African-American. "It does," he said. "Growing up, I came up with this name: I'm a 'Cablinasian.'" As in Caucasian-black-Indian-Asian. Woods has a black father (or to be precise, if I am interpreting Woods' reported ancestry correctly, a half-black, one-quarter American Indian, one-quarter white father) and a Thai mother (or, with the same caveat, a half-Thai, half-Chinese mother). "I'm just who I am," Woods told Oprah Winfrey, "whoever you see in front of you."

But just "who I am" remained contested ground. According to Time magazine, Woods' coming out as a Cablinasian caused "a mini-racial firestorm ... Woods' remarks infuriated many African Americans who ... see him as a traitor ... Some blacks saw Woods' assertion of a multiracial identity as a sellout that could touch off an epidemic of 'passing.'" Light-skinned Colin Powell, responding to Woods' comments, "In America, which I love from the depths of my heart and soul, when you look like me, you're black."

Adding fuel to the fire stirred up by Woods' comments are their political implications. Congress is considering adding a multiracial category to the 2000 census, and supporters of the controversial new category immediately seized upon Woods' statement as evidence that the old categories -- black, white, Asian and Pacific Islander, native American and "other" -- are inadequate. Civil rights groups like the NAACP, who are bitterly opposed to adding the multiracial category because they fear it will lead to a loss of black political and economic clout, are not likely to enjoy the spectacle of Woods becoming a poster child for multiracialism.

I'm not putting forward Tiger Woods as a role model, racial or otherwise. I don't know anything about him, except that he seems to respect both of his parents, is an athletic prodigy who is a masterful self-marketer, and is given to telling dumb black-men-have-big-dicks jokes in slick men's magazines. But whoever Woods may be, his refusal to be pigeonholed into a single racial category points the way out of the dualistic rigidity and emotional hysteria that has led America into a racial impasse. By choosing to embrace all of who he is -- an entity for which there is no name, except one that sounds like a tribe from the imaginary country of Narnia -- Woods, the goofy 21-year-old with the golden-brown skin and the beautiful swing, has become a messenger for a larger truth: Our race does not make us who we are.

In our hearts, we all know this. It is a truth written in American blood by Martin Luther King Jr. and enunciated by every great world religious tradition. But it is a truth that only whites have traditionally been allowed to enjoy. The bitter legacy of white racism in America denied blacks the freedom to define themselves independently of their color. Because whites saw blacks as being black before they saw them as being human beings, blacks were

forced to embrace what should have been an irrelevancy, forced to erect a protective ideology upon the accident of their skin color.

That reaction was inevitable. Negritude, Afrocentrism, Black Pride and other manifestations of identity politics are all understandable ideologies, but they are -- or should be -- provisional. Like booster rockets, they should fall away once they have carried their passengers out of the heavy atmosphere in which white judgment debilitates.

To understand the shortcomings of Black Pride, one need only look at its mirror version, White Pride. Whites who are obsessed with their racial identity are either pathological Aryan Nation outsiders lurking around in the woods, or confused camp-followers of multiculturalism, seeking to find specious Caucasian "roots" just as they enviously imagine people of color have found theirs. In either case, their racist ideology is an attempt to fill a void that cannot and should not be filled -- because that void is the space of human freedom. Exactly to the degree that race comes to constitute one's identity, one is unfree. White Pride followers are like 12-step zombies who, despairing of living with the anxiety that accompanies freedom, have handed their identities over to a Higher Caucasian Power. And their black counterparts trap themselves in a similar cul-de-sac.

Defenders of black racialism respond that one cannot compare black racial affirmation with its white counterpart, since one group is powerless and one is powerful. (The extreme version of this argument is that blacks cannot be racists.) But this response locks blacks in a permanently reactive stance, enshrining victimhood as their defining characteristic. In an act of world-class paternalism, Rep. Maxine Waters commented that advocates of a mixed-race

category "want to be seen for all they are, but I don't think they're making the connection about how it could affect how they're represented, or who's being an advocate for them when they get mistreated." It apparently didn't occur to her that these not-so-tragic-mulattoes might have different opinions about the dangers of "mistreatment."

The case of Woods reveals the central stupidity of American racial politics: the discrepancy between the rigid way we talk about race and the fluid realities of who we increasingly are. Part of the changed reality is the rising number of mixed-race people like Woods, who demand and deserve their own census classification. But part of it is also found within Americans of all races.

Despite the persistence of bigotry, I believe that white Americans are far more racially enlightened than ever before. Yes, there are differences between the races -- differences of class, culture, upbringing, history. But the polite, orthodox approach to black-white relations, enshrined in "diversity training" exaggerates those differences and makes genuine communication all but impossible. Whites have grown enormously weary of the formal, repetitive, go-nowhere black-white two-step. They desperately want a signal from blacks that they, too, have had it with trying to communicate through six panes of multicultural glass.

So where does Tiger Woods fit into all this? First of all, it's important to point out that Woods did not repudiate blacks or blackness. He paid tribute to the black golfers who came before him, and he embraced his black father. What he repudiated was one of America's founding and most traumatic racial myths -- the one-drop rule, according to which anyone possessing even a trace of black blood was -- and to some degree, still is -- considered black.

I am not calling for blacks, or any other group, to recant their pride in who they are. Nor am I suggesting that those who identify as black, whatever their ancestry (most American blacks are of mixed race) should follow Woods' example. The worst thing that could happen would be if mixed-race people entered into the racial spoils system, competing for victim status with other minorities. The point is not that people should flee from who they are, but that, as far as possible, they should be allowed to create who they are. Everyone should be allowed to choose the word -- or, as in Woods' case, make up the word -- that describes them. And more profoundly, everyone should be allowed to create an identity based not on race, but on their attributes as a human being.

When my Japanese-American father was sent to a barren Colorado internment camp during World War II, anyone who was 1/8 Japanese was considered racially worthy of an all-expense-paid trip to the barbed wire. But things moved on. During my entire half-Japanese, half-white life, I can recall exactly one racist comment, from some cretinous stagehand who is probably now moving his lips over a Soldier of Fortune magazine in an amphetamine-filled trailer. As a Scottapanese, I just felt benignly "different" -- and I enjoyed that difference as a badge of honor that didn't cut me off from others. Blessed by having no defining racial identity, I was allowed to construct who I was out of actual experiences, rather than from blocky, artificial boxes like "race." Am I white? Am I Asian? Who cares?

It would be naive to assume that my experience is universal. As journalist Lise Funderburg documents in "Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity" (Morrow, 1994), many half-black people -- particularly if they aren't lucky enough to grow up in enlightened middle-class enclaves like Berkeley -- face a

more problematic self-classification. In America's subtle, shifting racial landscape, blackness is still the great fixed point, essential, unalterable. Whites, Hispanics and Asians can -- in part depending on their class -- define themselves, make up their own identities independent of race. It's much harder for blacks to do that -- partly because whites won't let them, but also because, as many of Funderburg's subjects relate, other blacks won't let them. "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,/When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,/Then how should I begin/To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?" T.S. Eliot's words eloquently capture the inner paralysis that attends external judgment.

And yet the mixed-race men and women Funderburg interviews are not, in the end, paralyzed. In awkward, uneven, but also triumphant ways, these pure products of America navigate the tricky river that runs through our land and our hearts. They -- we -- have learned to live and thrive within the difference, the racial divide, that so needlessly frightens America. Like them, America has a white parent and a black parent, and an Asian one and a Hispanic one too. It's time for Mother's Day.

April 30, 1997

1. Is Tiger Woods a traitor to the African American community?
2. Do you think that Tiger Woods or Colin Powell is right when it comes to racial identity in America? Why?
3. Should Afrocentrism and Black Pride "fall away" like rocket boosters as Kamiya states or are they a permanent legacy of white racism? Are they locking blacks into perpetual victimhood?
4. Explain what Kamiya means when he writes that "to the degree that race comes to constitute one's identity, one is unfree"? Do you agree with him?
5. Is it true that it is more difficult for blacks to define themselves than it is for Hispanics, whites, and Asians? What does Funderburg mean when she writes that other blacks won't let them define themselves?
6. Is it fair for a Scottapanese to compare his experience with a Cablinasian?