

The Way We Conceptualize Identity Affects African Americans

CLAIRE BOLDING

WRITER'S COMMENT: Every time I write an essay, it's like pulling teeth. The satisfying reward is in figuring out what to say and then finally, several drafts later, saying it. The struggle through this essay was unique for me because, rather than trying to draw a grand conclusion based on the sum of all of the articles that I read for this class, African American Studies 172, I tried to engage in a conversation that emerged through the readings. I approached writing this way because I had already written a page summary for each of the articles that I refer to, as Bettina Ng'weno required for the class. These summaries were tangible and helped me approach the abstract concept of identity somewhat rationally. AAS 172, "New African Diaspora Identities," was a fun, discussion-based class in which we all developed our own ways of approaching and analyzing contemporary identities. Many thanks to Bettina, Raquel Scherr, Gary Goodman, and Pamela Demory for coaching me in logical thinking and writing.

—*Claire Bolding*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Writing a social science research paper requires the development of a research question, the collection of primary and secondary data, an analysis of this material, a discussion of this analysis in light of social theory regarding the general and specific topic, and all these things need to build to a convincing logical argument in an original and imaginative way. In AAS 172, "Diaspora and New Black Identities," students developed their research papers on new Black identities building from the other assignments in the class: a book review of Barak Obama's autobiography, a genealogy of a relative's identity formation (Claire chose her father) and a set of response papers to theoretical articles. The book review and the genealogy give students tangible examples and data upon which to apply the theories they read. Being deeply committed to discovery, Claire Bolding searched for answers in her paper even when they proved uncomfortable. At the same time she presented her work in a creative artistic style allowing her passion for the subject to come through. The wonderful thing about Claire's writing for this class is that she not only wrote a solid research paper, but she took both an intellectual and a stylistic risk.

—*Bettina Ng'weno, African American Studies*

“WHAT’S your major?” (Not an unusual question in this environment, a party full of students.)

“African American Studies,” I answer. “It’s funny—” I continue; I want to say how funny it is that every time I tell anyone what my major is, I start to explain my blond-haired blue-eyed self. But I am interrupted.

“Four hundred years of oppression isn’t funny,” my Irish-descent companion asserts self-righteously and walks away.

Yeah, I think sarcastically, African American Studies classes are such riot . . . “they” are just natural entertainers.



WHILE EXPLORING African American Studies, I have discovered more than what I originally sought. One byproduct of my studies is the unusual range of reactions that I get when I talk to people in my social circle about African American Studies. To me, these experiences reinforce that we live in a segregated society and when we step out of our assigned roles, others feel threatened: we face resistance and marginalization, not to mention imposed, ignorant, and sometimes ridiculous assumptions. The way people identify themselves and are identified by others affects who we befriend, what we think is appropriate (or inappropriate) to say to whom, who we vote for, where we spend our money, the clothes that we wear, the values that we assign, the way we perceive the human world.

Although society is a web of chosen and imposed identity, identity classifications are imagined categories. To social scientists, an imagined thing with real consequences is a *construct*. Some people construct categories around themselves that others do not imagine them in and vice versa. The categories that we use every day are unreliable, inconsistent, illogical even; they are applied unequally and are falsely posited as comparable categories. Globalization complicates identity matters with the rise of transportation and communication technologies, the demographic changes of immigration, the cultural exchange and ideological blending that immigration causes, and the rise of transnational communities. Black Americans are significant

in this discussion because they are an imagined category at one end of an imagined spectrum. Black Americans inhabit the end of the spectrum that has historically served as the scapegoat for society's ills. This spectrum is constructed by the media, the government, popular culture, and academia. We must regard the constructed categories of the spectrum critically, logically, skeptically. We can resist imposing, perpetuating, and experiencing the oppression of the racist identity spectrum by confounding traditional identity categorization and choosing to use these imagined categories as alliances in the struggle for social justice.

In this paper I question the nature of traditional identity categories in order to start to decode the biased subtext of identity assertions and generalizations. Although humanity will always have its cruelties, I believe in cultivating human empathy through relationships, reason, and education. With the ability to decode the subtext of identity, a person can make educated choices of which narratives to identify with, rather than absentmindedly perpetuating past injustices.

The Inconsistency of Identity Classifications

ALTHOUGH IDENTITY categories seem naturally fixed, they are constructed. This is evident in the inconsistency with which we classify and apply group identities: language classifications get confused with racial categories; cultural experience is required for membership in heritable ethnic groups; people whose world views are informed by ethno-specific narratives do not necessarily self-identify ethnically; and each society has its own set of rules for identity classification. Furthermore, the rapid changes of globalization are making identity classifications ever-slippery.

Juan Flores, in "Triple Consciousness? Afro-Latinos on the Color Line," an adaptation of W. E. B. Dubois's early 20th-century concept of "double consciousness," reveals the inconsistency in our concept of race. He reasons that Afro-Latinos in the U.S. must negotiate a triple consciousness. Like other black people in the U.S., they are placed in the racial binary of black/white: they must function as black people (one consciousness) in a white-dominated world (second consciousness) (82). Furthermore, as Latinos, they carry the legacy of Latin America's racial ideology, which clumps

people of any race into the “Hispanic” classification, a pseudo-race (81). Thus Flores gives one example of an inconsistent group identity classification: By designating a shared language as a racial category, nationalist ideologies and the popular imagination have created a category, race, with incomparable sub-classifications: speaking Spanish does not preclude a person from being *black*, *white*, or anything else.

Senator Barack Obama reveals inconsistency in a different way. Obama, the third black Senator in U.S. history, writes in his autobiography of how he came to see himself as a black man, of gaining entry into a genetically classified group through experience. As he grew up, raised by his white mother and grandparents, he recognized similarities between his experiences and those of his black peers, but he did not fully identify as a black man until he actively participated in the black community in Chicago: living in a black community, going to black churches, learning and sharing the elders’ concerns for the youth of the community. Until then, he thought that he did not have the experiences to legitimately consider himself a part of Black America. Although Obama inherited the physical traits from his African father that some would argue constitute him as “Black” or “African American,” he did not identify with African Americans—even though he wanted to—until he gained experience. Through experience, Obama gained entry into a group classified by heritable traits.

My dad’s self-identification illustrates another layer of inconsistency in individual and group identity classifications: if everyone has an ethnicity, why doesn’t everyone identify ethnically? As a warm-up question for a report on personal identity, I asked him, “What do you think the American Dream is?” He answered, “My American Dream is to live in peace and security, free from judgment, or at least unconcerned about how others perceive me,” and he later added, “. . . and to enjoy good health.” This dream matches the European-dominated narrative, presented to me in school as *U.S. History*: Pilgrims/Puritans came to America to escape the judgments of a religiously intolerant England. The extended Euro-dominated narrative holds that people also migrated to America for freedom of trade; many historians would argue that this was the primary motivation for the American Revolution. This may be true,

but the Revolution decidedly advanced the interests of Americans of western European descent; obviously, not all people migrated to this continent for these reasons or even by choice. Although ethnicity does not appear to play a significant role in my dad's self-defined identity, his vision of the American Dream could be considered ethno-specific.

Benjamin Bailey, in his study, "Dominican-American Ethnic/Racial Identities and the United States Social Categories," shows that identity classifications, themselves, vary from nation to nation. Bailey's study reveals that the Dominican concept of "race" is more flexible than that of the U.S. The U.S. conceptual framework emphasizes fixed unitary categories of phenotype (observable physical attributes) and genetic inheritance (679). The Dominican framework, however, allows for flexible racial identity categories. "White" people enjoy privilege in both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic; the degree of whiteness in the Dominican Republic, however, is determined by the individual's economic class, not necessarily by their genetic inheritance (680). According to Bailey's study, second-generation Dominican-Americans self-identify in terms of cultural (Dominican) and linguistic (Hispanic) connections and choose not to identify within the U.S.'s racial categories (680).

Identity classification is, thus, inconsistent and imagined. It is also constantly changing. With the rise of transportation and communication technologies, these changes are happening very quickly. With this rapid globalization, it is becoming increasingly difficult to classify people by the physical space they inhabit, or by the geographic location where their ancestors *originated*. Many people in the U.S. (Italian-Americans, Dominican-Americans, etc.) identify based on their national *origins*. In casual conversation, origin, race, and ethnicity can all mean the same thing. For example, *African American*, for many people, conjures origin in Africa, a dark skin color, and perhaps the cultural narratives of specific ethnicities as well. Yet *origin* is another category that is difficult to clearly define. Migration, trade, and cultural exchange complicate our ability to trace genetic and cultural origins. If we went back far enough, anthropologists and theologians agree, we would all trace our origins to the same place: Africa (Harrold, 1).

In this changing world, many migrants root their identity, not in geographical origins, but in lifestyle and shared experience. According to Alejandro Portes, the rise of transnational communities, which are networks created through immigration and trade that cross national borders and are not based in one location, confounds traditional notions of identity classification as based on country of origin (229). These small-scale networks—the “byproduct of improved communications, better transportation, and free trade laws” (228)—are an unexpected element of globalization, which was originally geared towards the interests of multinational and transnational corporations (231). The to-and-fro migrants of these networks, Portes writes, do not identify with the populations of any grounded space; rather, they identify with others in their networks, who share their lifestyle and experience (230).

Another byproduct of globalization, increased immigration, changes the way people identify in the U.S. Most of the second generation Dominican-American participants in Bailey’s study identified along linguistic and national origin lines, as opposed to the white/nonwhite U.S. categorization (677). These differing perspectives on race categories suggest that the growing second-generation immigrant population in the U.S. challenges American assumptions about identity. Considering that second-generation immigrants comprise 10% of the U.S. population, and an even higher percentage of youth, the historically dominant, linear black/white racial spectrum cannot possibly maintain supremacy (679). Although the U.S. is a nation of (mostly) immigrants, the impact of immigration to the U.S. has changed since the 1965 Immigration Act. One reason is that post-1965 immigration policy favors highly educated professionals, who have more of a chance of overcoming the challenges of economic assimilation (Bailey 679). Many post-1965 immigrants also bring with them a broad range of perspectives on a post-colonial world. Second generation immigrants since 1965 are even more likely to change American society because they are able to blend elements of their parents’ global perspectives with their American socialization.

The Purpose of Identity Classification: Highlighting Contrast

IN THE U.S.'s dominant black/white racial spectrum, identity categories highlight contrast and create the false neutrality of whiteness. They always express more than their face value. Identity categories can express nationalist bias and assert implicit assumptions about groups of people.

Among second-generation Dominican-Americans, for example, self-identifications express the Dominican racial ideology (Bailey 679). The Dominican Republic, which shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with Haiti, has very few "black" citizens, but just across the border, everyone is "black." This segregation is more ideological than what we might think of as "racial." The national ideology of race in the Dominican Republic is very anti-Haitian, a sentiment that stems from Haiti's successful slave rebellion, which abolished slavery in Haiti in 1803, when it was declared an all-black nation. This revolt threatened all of the slave-holding societies in the Americas, because those in power feared that the slaves' revolutionary fervor would spread. This was particularly threatening to the Dominican Republic because of its proximity to Haiti. In Haiti, black is not dependent on skin tone; it is, by definition, a black nation. In the Dominican Republic, consequently, only Haitians are considered black. This nationalist ideology of race manifests in a social stigma against Haitians, and therefore, "black" people. This explains why, in Bailey's study, second generation Dominican immigrants in the U.S. actively choose to identify as *other-than-black*.

Obama's experience suggests another way identity is a tool for emphasizing contrast. His white grandparents, Gramps and Toot, portrayed his absent black father in mythological proportions. Through the stories that they told, they insisted that Obama senior was a larger-than-life paragon of virtue, in contrast to their image of other black people. The stories were "compact, apocryphal, told in rapid succession in the course of one evening, then packed away for months, sometimes years, in [his] family's memory" (8). Although they had an intelligent black son-in-law, and although they had a black grandson to whom they were obviously devoted, Gramps and Toot still perceived old stereotypes, manifesting in fear and simplicity. This is evident when Toot, upset by an aggressive panhandler,

explains that he was particularly frightening because “He is *black*” (88).

My dad’s narrative provides another angle of identity-as-contrast. Ethnicity is supposedly universal, yet in the U.S., people of European descent are not usually considered, nor do they tend to consider themselves, ethnic. If identification is a tool for highlighting contrast, I think that my dad does not identify ethnically because he sees little ethnic contrast to highlight: most aspects of his life are white-dominated, or serve the interests of a white-dominated society. Because he rarely feels different ethnically/racially, he is not generally aware of his own ethnicity/race. This false sense of white-as-neutral in a white-dominated society suggests that identity, as a tool for highlighting difference, is economic and political because those with more economic and political advantage serve as the seemingly neutral reference point, to which everyone else is compared.

Black People in the U.S. and Identity

THE BLACK/WHITE polarity in U.S. culture is complicated by yet another commonly drawn distinction—that between native-born black Americans and black immigrants. This distinction has been made—by individuals, the media, and academia, largely to distance immigrants from the legacy of American slavery. Yet it ends up perpetuating the negative connotations of blackness by suggesting that black immigrants are not as strongly affected by the history of racialized slavery in the U.S. However, black immigrants actually face the same institutionalized violence and discrimination that native-born blacks have confronted for generations. Making distinctions between native-born and immigrant blacks does not absolve anyone from imposed oppressive baggage; rather, it divides people who face the same institutional problem.

Many black immigrants want to dissociate themselves from native-born African Americans, as Carolle Charles explains in “Being Black Twice”:

Historically in the United States, blackness has been the central metaphor for otherness and oppression. Meanings of blackness are associated with a subor-

dinated place. This is notwithstanding the significant differences in the socio-economic positioning of different segments of the black population This informs prevailing practices out of which the social inequalities affecting a great number of blacks in the United States are produced. These inequalities are especially evident in the inner cities, which are marked by poverty, drug infestation, and violence. Blackness remains the signifier through which dependence and degradation are measured. (172)

As a Haitian immigrant to the U.S., Charles is uniquely aware of the connotations of *black* in the United States: in Haiti, blackness is a matter of national pride, but in the U.S., it seems to be a matter of national shame.

The media also draws distinctions between native-born and immigrant blacks. In her article, "Black Immigrants in the United States and the 'Cultural Narratives' of Ethnicity," Jemima Pierre illustrates this phenomenon with the story of the "brutal assassination of 22-year-old Amadou Diallo by four New York police officers" (141). "The Black community," Pierre writes,

correctly read this heinous crime as one in a long line of systematic racially motivated abuses. On the other hand, the mainstream media, while minimally acknowledging the racial character of the crime, indirectly undermined such recognition by emphasizing instead the victim's immigrant status . . . could his immigrant status have allowed him to be implicitly understood as 'innocent' in contrast to the African American often assumed to be guilty of criminality? (142)

The story of Amadou Diallo, as Pierre places it in the context of hundreds of years of "systematic racially motivated abuses," indicates that black people in the U.S., native-born or not, are all subject to the consequences of blackness as (in Carolle Charles's words) "the central metaphor for otherness and oppression" (Charles 172).

Pierre argues that social scientists who explore the reasons for black immigrants' relative economic success, as compared to native-born African Americans, actually perpetuate a racist ideol-

ogy. She writes of social scientist Mary Waters, among others, who claims that the best hope for African immigrants is to maintain their “cultural distinctiveness” and not assimilate into American society. Waters claims that assimilating into society would force African immigrants into downward mobility, as they would exhibit the stereotypical behaviors associated with native-born African American society, which, supposedly, prevent them from gaining upward mobility. Waters justifies the relative success of African immigrants by claiming that their culture and immigrant status give them better attitudes towards working and white culture (*another incidence of “white as neutral”*), as well as a “strong, patrifocal” family structure and intolerance for racism. This argument tries to deny the racist structure of society: if some black people can succeed, lack of success must be the individual’s own fault, not racism. But Waters actually reinscribes the racist structure by asserting generalized, negative stereotypes of African American society (which, Pierre notes, have already been debunked several times over).

In social science this is known as the “Culture of Poverty” theory, which holds that African Americans who live in poverty continue to do so as other minorities gain upward mobility because their “cultural practices,” such as poor attitudes towards work, prevent them from rising (147). The Culture of Poverty theory blames African Americans (and other minorities) and does not investigate what F. Nii-Amoo Dodoo calls “demand-side factors,” meaning, the level of acceptance in American schools, employers, government, and individuals (542).

The Culture of Poverty theory, as demonstrated in Waters’s argument, also ignores the demographic of immigrants to the U.S.: African immigrants are the most highly educated group in American society. In “Assimilation Differences among Africans in America,” Dodoo compares the economic success of native-born African Americans, African immigrants to the U.S., and Caribbean immigrants to the U.S. By statistically controlling for level of education, that is—by comparing individuals with equal levels of education—Dodoo discovers that African immigrants to the U.S. face an economic disadvantage in assimilating, as compared with African-descent Caribbean immigrants and native-born African Americans. In the three groups, she finds that Caribbean immigrants are most

rewarded by the U.S. economy for their education, and African immigrants are not rewarded for degrees earned in African universities, which are actually reputed to be more rigorous in math and science than American schools. “What has for long been interpreted as a result of relatively superior (inferior) traits associated with Caribbean immigrants (African American),” Doodoo writes, “may largely be a result of differential acceptance by American society” (542).

Is making a general statement about black immigrants implicitly reinforcing an opposite notion about native-born African Americans? Although differences must obviously exist between native-born African Americans and African and African-descent immigrants, the recurring theme is that people want to make the distinction so that immigrants do not suffer from the stereotypes that have been associated with black people in the U.S. for centuries. But, as the tragic story of Amadou Diallo illustrates, black immigrants do face the same institutional violence as native-born African Americans. To combat this violence and the stereotypes that, though debunked again and again, still recur, political unity is required.

People Move and Ideas Change

IDENTITY EXCLUDES no one: everyone has a self-identity that they consciously choose and everyone experiences imposed identity categorization (albeit sometimes unawares)—ranging from the government census to everyday interactions. Race, ethnicity, and other identity categories are political; no category is neutral (especially not if it *seems* neutral). How does one respond to these imagined categories that have such real consequences? I think that confounding the current racial/ethnic identity categories is a step towards removing the destructive identity connotations that burden black people and other minorities in the U.S. and trap white people in the role of—often unwitting—oppressor. White Americans can participate in changing constricting identity concepts, as preliminary steps, by identifying and questioning the neutrality of whiteness, recognizing their (our) role, and acknowledging white privilege.

Pedro A. Noguera and Benjamin Bailey offer some insightful, seemingly contradicting thoughts on how we might tackle this

problem. Noguera points out, in “Anything but Black: Bring Politics Back to the Study of Race,” that, although race is a social construct, it has political and social realities. Recognizing the inherent politicality of race, he claims, helps one maintain skepticism about racial categorization, but also reveals the potential for political unity. He describes his own racial/political identity formation as a kid, largely influenced by his 11-year-old cousin, Ronald Frazier:

. . . [U]nlike me, Ronald had figured out the politics of racial identity fairly quickly, and he readily shared his insights. Having grown up amidst the racial violence of the East Bronx, Ronald had drawn the conclusion that racial identity had very little to do with national origin or even color. He explained, ‘Pedro, there are only two races—black or white. It’s not about what color you are or whether or not you’re West Indian; it’s about which side you’re on.’

He went on to explain that there were some whites and Puerto Ricans who sided with blacks, and some blacks who sided with whites He assured me that race was a political stance, and that it was possible to maintain our Caribbean identity, which we associated largely with the music we listened to and the food we ate at home. The public face we wore to the outside world demanded utter clarity. (195-6)

Noguera’s explanation of race is enlightened and interesting, but will all people wear a face of “utter clarity” when it comes to the politics of race? I agree with Noguera that this type of unity against oppression would be very effective, but Bailey’s prediction seems more realistic. Based on his study of how second-generation Dominican-Americans identify, Bailey thinks that the influences of post-1965 immigration challenge the U.S.’s dichotomous racial paradigm. As more and more second-generation immigrants come of age, Bailey implies, the black/white dichotomy will splinter.

For this black/white dichotomy to change, both *blackness* and *whiteness* need to be challenged. Fair-skinned immigrants with different notions of identity are unlikely to challenge whiteness, because, as many scholars have noted, the process of assimilation for fair-skinned immigrants into the U.S. has been a process

of “becoming white” (Pierre 144-5). It is the people who identify as white, and those who don’t necessarily identify as white but still benefit from the construct of whiteness, who must confront the concept of *whiteness*. This is definitely happening to some degree in corners of academia (whether or not it’s happening outside of academia would be the topic of another paper).

For me, taking African American Studies classes is a way of challenging *whiteness*, by way of challenging *blackness*. As Carolle Charles, a Haitian immigrant, points out, the American concept of *blackness* is an *American* stigma, not a universal truth. Sometimes, if I’m feeling self-conscious and different, I feel as if I represent whiteness in the classroom. I imagine a psychic message coming my way, pulsing, “You don’t belong here!” Whether or not anyone in my classes actually thinks this, I now know what it feels like—to some degree—to appear to represent a whole race, which is undoubtedly a valuable experience. However, I have realized that I cannot personally bear the burden of the violence and oppression that the construct of *whiteness*—not the construct of *blackness*—has created. The best I can do is listen, speak often and honestly, and if there is misunderstanding, maintain the integrity of my voice.

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Prized Writing 2005–2006

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