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Identity Construction: The Rhetoric of Blackness

Introduction

To ask in today's society, today's particular social, cultural, economic, political situation, "what is Blackness?" is a rather precarious question. It is a deeply metaphysical concept that seeks to discuss what it means to be Black, compressed into a single term. Few could answer with literacy, and even fewer could account for the vast nuance embedded within the concept. Yet, it is amongst the most widely discussed subjects in our culture's daily rhetoric. Whether that be in daily conversation, on social media, in the news, or in tv shows and movies. When a dance trend reaches notoriety on Tik Tok; when a news headline reads, "the first Black person to...;" or when mugshots of Black faces highlight the local news, rhetorical contributions are being made on Blackness. Racial identification is inextricably interwoven into the very fabric of the nation's consciousness, as much as the country would like to proclaim color-blindedness. Of course, the conditions of our circumstance have extraordinarily shifted due to the tireless toil of generations before, and the perception of Blackness along with it, but we tend not to recognize the extent that history influences, and the remnants of which persists into our present -- our struggle inseparable from our identity.

Coming from a history in which Black people were deemed animalistic, dumb, lazy, brutish, ugly, *not human*; situating Blackness in positivity is an integral aspect to addressing the issues Black people face, especially the youth, in the 21st century. Being such a salient and

foundational topic in our existence, countless Black thinkers, writers, activists, and revolutionaries have sought to contribute to the conversation. People such as WEB Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Assata Shakur amongst many others have offered insight, in their own historical contexts, towards the construction of Black identity, which has spurred my interest and own conceptions of this issue. Thus, in this essay I will seek to deconstruct Blackness as a concept and discuss how it has been conceptualized by notable Black thinkers, in order to contribute to this conversation in its modernity to the benefit of the perception of Black people.

On My Life

So, why is identity construction, especially its racial component, so important? To answer that, I deem it useful to first relay my own connection and personal stake in this subject matter, how to understand Blackness. Had I been asked about Blackness in middle or high school, I would not have known where to begin, and my response surely would have been problematic. I was born from a Portuguese and French mother and a Haitian immigrant father. Although, for the greater part of my life, he has not been present. As a result, I was predominantly raised by my white family members, a precarious upbringing for a little Black boy. But, my experience is a bit unique, deferring from this all too frequent American trope. My young mother was invariably drawn to Black spaces, all of her friends and partners were Black, and anytime I was brought to some social gathering it was a predominantly Black space. In my younger years, she moved us from Warwick, Rhode Island, a predominantly white town, to one of the most dangerous parts of Providence where many of her friends resided. Even when we moved back to the town over, West Warwick, we frequently returned to visit. Additionally, for the better part of my early

childhood I was able to maintain a relationship with some of my Black family members. Which is all to say, my childhood was a weird middle ground where I was raised almost adjacent to the Black community. Nonetheless, my feelings of otherness from those that looked like me pervaded. Despite living in Providence, I never attended school there. My mother used to say, “I didn’t want you to go to school there, I don’t think you’d survive, you’re too soft.” I’ve never forgotten that, it indelibly impacted the way I began to view the world in my earliest years.

For the whole of my life, I attended predominantly white school systems, and upon entering the West Warwick school system in second grade, I remained there until graduation. West Warwick, again, was a bit different than the stereotypical predominantly white town. It is the second smallest town, in terms of size, in the smallest state in the country. It’s a lower-middle class area, but it is important to emphasize that, like any other place, that was the median amongst a broad spectrum of wealth disparity. What is most interesting is the town’s demographics, being a former milltown. Despite being predominantly white, amongst the white population there were many Portuguese and Italian people, additionally there was a significant Hispanic population, and in terms of Black people, there may not have been a great many, but I was far from alone in having people that looked like me in the classroom. It would not be a shock if the demographics resembled that of the nation’s demography. It was an extremely interesting bubble, its own little microcosm. My experiences, within this context, with the other kids in these schools, is what most confounded my understanding of Blackness. In my experience in this schooling system, outright, blatant racism was rare, if not unheard of; whereas, microaggressions and smaller forms of discrimination reigned supreme. Although, I didn’t understand that nuance, so it was not until recently that I fully discerned how harmful this form of racism is, and the extent to which it harmed me.

It began with my hair. Frequently boasting a big, messy, frizzy afro that I had no notion on how to care for, people frequently commented and asked to touch it, which I naturally obliged. “Oh my god! It feels like a sponge, that’s sooo cool!” they would say. For the better part of middle and high school it was a center of my personality, and I was flattered by the attention people gave me for it. Even so, I always dimly sensed the problematic nature of this, I sometimes felt I was being made a spectacle -- wisps of dehumanization lingered. The 2010’s were the peak age of race jokes, especially with the emergence of the social media platform, Vine. Such jokes frequented my middle and high school circles reinforcing and projecting various racial tropes onto each racial group, particularly so with the Black kids. If we were to encounter a police officer, or see a car go by “Joe, hide it’s the cops!” followed by a flurry of laughter. As a seven year track athlete, I was particularly skilled at long and triple jump. My athletic abilities were frequently attributed to my race, “You’re so lucky, it’s not even fair. If *I* was black...” For much of 8th grade, a few members of the team began calling me ‘Black Joe’, not because there was another person with my name on the team, but because I was a good jumper. Every white person, every person seemed to say n*gga. Everybody knew a celebrity that I resembled. I allowed it all, it was what was normal.

Ironically, what caused the most damage, a statement I heard too many times from both my white and Black classmates, “Joe, you know, you’re really white for a Black guy”, “To be honest, even though I’m white, I’m probably blacker than you.” Unlike other comments, this had immediate, recognizable impacts on my self-identity, self-esteem, and my general conception of what it means to be Black. I had come to understand early in my life, through my mother, that my white half did not matter to others, at the end of the day, I was Black. That was that. But I quickly learned that Blackness meant much more than one’s appearance. It was dress, it was the

way one talked, it was body language, the music one listened to. I didn't wear saggy pants, speak in a "blaccent", I never got into trouble. I was a quiet, straight A student that liked video games and dystopian novels when I wasn't at track practice. I pretended it didn't impact me, I jokingly fought back sometimes, but it effectively established within myself that I was not a normal Black person, and I surely was not white either. I bought into the belief of authentic Blackness being all of these stereotypes. Tropes like being loud and obnoxious; only caring about sports, rap, and shoes; getting into fights; having or wanting tattoos, overconfident, hypermasculine. I coped by owning this notion, "I'm different from other Black people" citing how I didn't want to associate myself with those negative stereotypes, all the while, feeling I was not Black enough because of it. Simultaneously, I searched for new ways to talk, dress, and carry myself to reflect my Blackness, while forcing myself to listen to certain genres of music I did not enjoy. While each person's experience is different, I know countless Black people, not just kids, face this same identity crisis. A crisis that some never overcome, opting to distance themselves from all things associated with Black people, often in fear of rejection. This necessitates literacy, an education, and conversations on what exactly Blackness is.

Deconstructing Blackness

There is a popular belief in this country, erected resulting from the civil rights movement, that the ultimate goal should be to abolish the notion of racial identity in exchange for a singular American identity. The underlying rationality posits that if we got rid of differentiating categories, like race, then people would not have a reason to be discriminatory to another person. This thought process, while sounding ideal, is reductive and harmful as it assumes that a vast population could suddenly separate from a history of a racial hierarchy codified in law, affirmed

through media and pseudo-science, and enacted in daily ritual. Moreover, it necessitates an assimilation into Americanness that many Black people do not desire, as one would surely find difficulty identifying with the nation and people who have systematically exploited and oppressed one's people for centuries. Such a task may have been much easier if the nation had ameliorated the issues of the past, but that has not been the case so far with disparities remaining in every measurable societal category, and racism thriving sixty years later. The discussion should not be centered around attempting to rid of differentiation, subsuming all into a homogenous box, instead our society must learn to respect and value diversity as the principal path forwards against racism and discrimination. To begin this task, I find it necessary that we reach at the roots in addressing the ideological values that undergird the nation's mechanisms. Working to understand and improve conceptions of Blackness both within the community and from the outside is what that looks like. Put simply, identity construction, especially for a marginalized minority group, is important because perception informs action.

To begin the deconstruction of Blackness, for purposes of better understanding this identity as a concept, it must be divided by its internal and external mechanisms. Internally, Blackness is represented as the self-created culture and characteristics of Black people within our communities. Put otherwise, internally constructed Blackness is Blackness as culture, Blackness as self-identity. It's necessary to consider this construction of Blackness as it becomes a sort of self-perpetuating system where values, practices, traditions, ideas, etc. are shared from parent to child, reinforced amongst friends and family, a concept that comes to transcend any individual to be a communal worldview enacted in daily life.

This is how people tend to understand Blackness, but there is another, more subversive component that contributes to its definition. Externally constructed Blackness may best be

understood as our narrative, the story of our people. Historically, Black people have rarely been given the opportunity, on a wide scale, to tell our own story. The *New York Times* bestseller, *News For All the People*, by Juan Gonzales and Joseph Torres provides a comprehensive account of the history of American media, with a particular focus on its treatment of race over time. The book opens explaining,

It is our contention that newspapers, radio, and television played a pivotal role in perpetuating racist views among the general population. They did so by routinely portraying non-white minorities as threats to white society and by reinforcing racial ignorance, group hatred, and discriminatory government policies. The news media thus assumed primary authorship of a deeply flawed national narrative: the creation myth of heroic European settlers battling an array of backward and violent non-white peoples to forge the world's greatest democratic republic.

(Gonzales and Torres, 2011)

This false, negative narrative that was *intentionally constructed* has effectively functioned to deepen racial divides and ensure a lasting negative perception of Black people in the national consciousness. A divide that runs as deeply to be integrated into each social, political, and economic system in the country. Media is not the only facet of society that has erected and rigidified racial discrimination in our society, but it is a key and underlooked cog in a complex system. So, when discussing external constructions of Blackness, it is integral to emphasize that this is not just some outside assessment of Black people by the majority white society, rather it has been the willful misrepresentation of facts by corporate America alongside the government to push a false narrative on the character, realities, and actions of Black people and Black communities.

With the advent of the internet and social media the influx of information from a plethora of sources has boomed, with the sheer mass of content growing exponentially. Although this has led to an increase in space for Black voices to be heard, it also serves to give increased space to further emphasize these same historical and dangerous tropes. This constructed narrative is a primary driver towards why people hold, and still hold racist attitudes and carry out widespread discrimination in a society that claims to champion liberty, equality, and justice without batting an eye.

Being that these differing components are collapsed into a single term, it becomes much clearer how confounding understanding Blackness truly is. Note that both Black and white people watch this news, and how this false narrative influences not only white viewers, but also Black people themselves. Even for the most mindful, informed, educated Black people, the sheer mass of stereotypes conveyed in the media over large periods of time inevitably begins to bleed into Black self-identity and Black culture. As the idea of self-fulfilling prophecy goes, if people are told something enough times, they will begin to believe it and become it. Meaning, these false, harmful, negative stereotypes that were not true to begin with, became true through media coverage of Black people. Moreover, internal and external constructions of Blackness inform one another as it cannot be said the media only portrays false and negative stereotypes. This reflects an even more convoluting nuance by which both externally and internally constructed Blackness are embedded with aspects of positivity and negativity; which, cyclically and continuously reinform and redefine one another. This is what we are dealing with when we deconstruct Blackness, and this is how we reach a phenomenon where some Black people boast the very stereotypes employed to oppress us. Without direct intervention, it

remains a highly efficient self-perpetuating rhetorical system used to keep Black people from achieving a clear and positive sense of identity that can be used to undo our issues in the modern day. Again, the words we use, the ways we think, and the way societal concepts are talked about matter in the concrete as perceptions will inform the actions of our future.

The Rhetoric of Blackness in Literature

The primary reason I started giving serious thought to the implications around what this concept we call Blackness means, and how it may be understood is through the work of countless Black scholars that had something insightful to say on the matter. Their scholarship and philosophy presented me with the content to understand how the historical situation that I'm in came to be. They presented me with the variety of ways in which Blackness manifested itself in our society. Moreover, I was able to recognize a consistency in certain themes across works spanning considerable time periods. A shared understanding that our condition is deeply troublesome, and requires attention and study if we hope to progress and dispel the stereotypes and negativity from our identity. Yet, each individual offered something unique that aided in the development of my understanding of Blackness.

To begin, WEB Du Bois, in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folks*, discusses the circumstances Black people faced in his time period in which Jim Crowism was in full swing. His context was much drearier in the sense that Black people faced lynchings, segregation, and found themselves classified as second class citizens. Education, wealth, and employment opportunities paled in comparison to that of today. He writes, "the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair. Men call the shadow prejudice,

and learnedly explain it as the natural defence of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the "higher" against the "lower" races ... [there is] the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil" (Du Bois, 1903). Du Bois delineates his time's predicament where his people are paupers of circumstance. He explains that external constructions of Black identity have been rhetorically positioned as the direct antithesis to all that is deemed good in the world, which justifies their discrimination. It particularly interested me that he chose the words, "natural defence" which asserts how American society took it a step further by painting Black people to be the devils on Earth, which not only justifies their mistreatment, but necessitates it. Internally, this rhetoric culminates in a definition of Blackness characterized by despair, struggle, poverty, and sadness. Nonetheless, he concludes with strained hope, "the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race" (Du Bois, 1903).

Zora Neale Hurston, in her 1928 essay, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" counters Du Bois' despaired Blackness by arguing that being Black is not so full of dread. Rather, she takes a more positive stance in maintaining that she will have a positive perception of herself regardless of the racial discrimination she faces, and how the historic race is something to find excitement in. Hurston writes, "No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think--to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep" (1928). She deplores the idea that Black people should be wasting their time pondering their woes, or worrying about how they are perceived by others. Rather, time would be best spent striving to achieve in a time with greater

opportunity than available to past generations. Their struggle and sacrifice paved her current realities, and it should be well spent. Within this argument, she added a profound layer in my understanding of Blackness when she states simply, “I remember the very day I became colored” (Hurtson, 1928). Becoming colored, or becoming Black assumes that that is not what she was before. She explains later, “I was not Zora of Orange County anymore, I was a little colored girl” (Hurstson, 1928). This fostered realization of my own racialization as I discussed earlier. Blackness transcends one’s individuality in the eyes of American society. Without racialization, Black people are just individuals with brown skin. Racialization is what makes a Black person, beyond and above who they may be as individuals. Racialization is yet another layer to be subsumed into how we conceptualize Blackness and describes how situations from my childhood where I was essentially labeled a white black person can rationally occur in our society.

In Langston Hughes’ 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” he comments on a conversation he had with another poet in which they state that they would like to be a poet rather than a Negro poet. What follows is a class analysis within the Black community where he writes of the Black middle class,

the mother often says "Don't be like niggers" when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, "Look how well a white man does things." And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather

not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns. (Hughes, 1926)

He posits a similar idea to Du Bois in the dichotomy that is erected between whiteness and Blackness, but exemplifies how the narrative comes to impact members of the Black community. What results is a deep self-hatred, and a flight from their own identity into whiteness. What results is a failed mimicry, especially in this time period, where it would be rare to find a white person that would truly accept and respect a Black person, regardless of how they choose to present themselves. From there, he explains how the admirable, noteworthy, profound aspects of Black culture are found in what he calls the lowest down. Those who share in Hurston's ideology, the ones who maintain their individuality, who do not care what others think are those who lead the most fulfilling lives. In doing so he establishes that the solution to Black struggles does not lie in abandoning our identity, instead we must continue to build upon what is already ours. That is how we will make our mark on the world as a people.

Assata Shakur's later autobiography, released in 1987 functioned similarly as *News for All the People*. Although, it was much more powerful as it gave painstaking examples and visuals to the extent that the United States government would go to maintain their racial order, the discriminatory status quo. Continuously shattering their own professed morality in exchange, every rule ever erected, and any measure to ensure justice to a human being. Yet, her Blackness deemed her subhuman, so those rules do not apply. She was a member of the Black Panther Party, an organization seeking the liberation of Black people, liberation from United States oppression. More than that, the Black Panther Party sought to change what it meant to be Black, an effort to reclaim the

narrative and fashion it internally. Being much too dangerous to the fabric of society, the United State government took every destabilization measure possible to destroy the organization by setting members, chapters, and other Black organizations against one another, planting informants into the organization, committing outright murder, and falsely arresting members. The latter was Shakur's circumstance, and she tells the story of endless corruption, torture, shoddy cover-ups, and outright racism deeply embedded in the justice system in a time after the civil rights movement where conditions were supposedly to have been improved, racism abolished (Shakur, 1987).

Conclusions

What does this mean today? Yes, we have achieved progress over the course of the last century in that ways that Blackness is understood and discussed, but the roots of each issue that was touched upon by Du Bois, Hughes, Hurston, and Shakur remain in today's society, and thus manifested themselves in how I understand my own life and identity. I resonate with these passages on the level of, to some extent, I feel their experience, wrestling with the same questions in 2022. How do their ideas play into our modern circumstances, specifically? How can we employ them to the improvement of how Blackness is constructed? Thinking back to Hughes' argument, I think a central issue for Black people in regards to Blackness as our identity is that it seems to be inextricably, exclusively tied to the lowest down. Despite the prevalence of ideas like Black is Beautiful and Black Excellence, most Black people experience social mobility through corporate America. This often necessitates distancing from grassroots Black communities, and entering into increasingly whiter spaces as one continues to climb the

economic ladder. Thus the dichotomy the Du Bois postulated remains in a sense in today's society. Hurston and Hughes particularly emphasize the importance of us maintaining our individuality both within ourselves and as a Black community. Unfortunately, for African-Americans what lies at the roots of even the most positive aspects of our culture is struggle -- overcoming and persevering. So whenever our story is not about struggle, it ceases to be Black in the eyes of many. To resituate and redefine Blackness I think we must go back further, as a community, to become more in touch and united with our African origins. This is where we may draw out the realities of our existence, the nature of Blackness outside of slavery to inform the most fulfilling path forward. Pan-Africanism as a worldwide movement is something I believe African-Americans in particular should engage in considering so many of us have lost our cultural and ancestral history. Pan-Africanism being the belief in unity amongst the entirety of the African Diaspora in order to address social and economic ills, build culture and community, and work together to improve the lives of the Black and Brown around the globe. Yet, even more fundamental than that, we must talk about these subjects. Of Blackness, of our conditions over time, of what's changed and what's remained, of our history, of who we would like to become. A Du Boisian notion of education, but not education in the broad sense, if we had a targeted education of the wider Black community specifically on who we are today and who we were yesterday, it will build the greatest groundwork to inform our future actions.

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