ESSAY

Black Meets Black: Encounters in America

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Abstract

This essay draws on James Baldwin's ideas on race, immigration, and American identity to examine the experience of contemporary African immigrants in the United States. More Africans have come to the U.S. since 1965 than through the Middle Passage, and only now is their experience gaining the full creative and critical attention it merits. Since becoming American entails adopting the racial norms and sentiments of the U.S., I explore how African immigrants contend with the process of racialization that is part and parcel of the American experience. Drawing on Baldwin's idea of blackness as an ethical category, I also consider the limits of the concept of Afropolitanism to characterize the new wave of African immigrants in the U.S.

Keywords: James Baldwin, African, immigrant, blackness, ethics, Taiye Selasi, Afropolitanism

Rather than a formal commentary on James Baldwin's work, this essay takes the form of a thought-piece. It retrieves Baldwin's ideas by freeing them from their original contexts and deploying them in new ones—here, to think about the experience of African immigrants contending with what it means to be black in contemporary America. Sometimes called the “new” African Americans, or American Africans, or what Chimamanda Adichie calls “non-American blacks,” more Africans have come to the U.S. since 1965 than through the Middle Passage, and their experience is finally gaining the creative and critical attention it merits.¹

1965 was a signal year for black America, for it marked the passage of both the Voting Rights Act, which enfranchised African Americans, and the Immigration and Nationality Act, which ended the immigration quota system that had barred mass entry of Africans and other immigrants of color to the U.S. These two laws, part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's “Great Society” legal achievements, have been decisive in setting the conditions for the “new” black America, and would alter

the course and character of black life in today's United States. The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 would have a dramatic effect on the composition of black America; the percentage of foreign-born black Americans was statistically insignificant (less than 0.1%) in 1960; now it stands at a record 9%, and as a recent Pew Research Center study concludes, "In total, black immigrants and their children make up roughly one-fifth (18%) of the overall black population in the U.S."² It wasn't only the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act, however, that made possible the mass immigrations of Africans to the United States. Without the Omnibus Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, black immigrants would have been forced to face the same kind of legal subjugation that African Americans had endured for centuries. Indeed, post-1965, with the end of *de jure* segregation and discrimination, African immigrants could come to America and—at least, according to the law—claim the rights and privileges of American citizenship, as well as benefit from affirmative action policies that sought to redress past injustice suffered by African Americans, which black immigrants prior to 1965 could not. In other words, in the absence of the Civil Rights Acts, the new immigration bill would have had little purchase for black people seeking to improve their lot in the land of dollars, for, by virtue of their "race," they would have had to assume, by law, a second-class status that did not apply to their white immigrant counterparts.

When it comes to theorizing race and immigration, we now have a body of scholarship on how European immigrants became "white" in America, and perhaps no writer has given us a more succinct articulation of that process than James Baldwin.³ Consider the following quotes, all three gleaned from Baldwin's late essays. In the 1984 essay, "The Price of the Ticket," Baldwin writes:

Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it. Sing or shout or testify or keep it to yourself: but *know whence you came*. This is precisely what the generality of white Americans cannot afford to do. They do not know how to do it—: as I must suppose. They come through Ellis Island, where *Giorgio* becomes *Joe*, *Pappavasilu* becomes *Palmer*, *Evangelos* becomes *Evans*, *Goldsmith* becomes *Smith* or *Gold*, and *Avakian* becomes *King*. So, with a painless change of name, and in the twinkling of an eye, one becomes a white American.⁴

Again in another late essay, "Black English: A Dishonest Argument," Baldwin reiterates the claim: "The price of the ticket was to cease being Irish, cease being Greek, cease being Russian, cease being whatever you had been before, and to become 'white.' And *that* is why this country says it's a white country and really believes it is."⁵ And finally in "On Being White . . . And Other Lies": "America became white—the people who, as they claim, 'settled' the country became white—because of the necessity of denying the black presence, and justifying the black subjugation."⁶

Baldwin is keen to point out that the history of European immigration to the U.S. entailed a twofold disavowal: on the one hand, the erasure of one's identity of

origin in order to become “white” and therefore American; and, on the other, the repudiation and oppression of an extant population upon arrival, a black presence against which white Americanness draws legibility and legitimacy. If this twofold process of disavowal is the means by which a European becomes (white) American, then by what mechanism does the new African immigrant become (black) American? Is disavowal also constitutive for the new African immigrant as it is for the European? Given that Americanness is predicated on race, how do we theorize the discursive and affective processes by which a Nigerian, a Sudanese, or a Somali becomes categorically “black” in America? Racial classification is fundamental to American society. Whether it’s a white American identity that is idealized, or a black one that is maligned, Americanness is defined by racial categorization. To be American, in short, is to be a racialized subject; regardless of race, one has to be legible as a raced person in order to be legally and culturally legible as an American. All immigrants discover this soon—applying for a work permit or a driving license, for residency or school—when asked to identify their race on almost all formal documentation. This is a foreign concept for many immigrants coming from African countries, where racial classification isn’t an organizing feature of the nation state; so we have to think carefully through the process of racialization that African immigrants also have to undergo as part of the naturalization process, the process of becoming American. Additionally, since naturalization, in addition to gaining papers, entails adopting the feelings of a new country, and since in America the set of feelings that underwrite whiteness and blackness differ markedly, we have to consider the demands of the disparate feelings of becoming American on the new African diaspora.

From Baldwin’s corpus, one learns that innocence is the key affect of American whiteness, a feeling that helps to conceal the country’s criminal and catastrophic history and to fuel a present nostalgia for an ideal American past. But American blackness has had little recourse to innocence and to romancing the past to forge its sense of self. On the contrary, it has held an opposite discursive and affective stance toward the past: recall the Baldwin line above, “know whence you came,” an imperative that demands a laying bare of and confrontation with history.

So, by way of Baldwin, to return to the question: how does the African immigrant become (black) American? Since the race rules of America differ markedly from those of the diverse countries of the African continent, we cannot presume race to be a constant across place, nor racial identification a given, and hence we have to weigh how *all* African immigrants have to undergo a process of becoming black according to American racial norms. Here, the African immigrant faces a particular dilemma, since he or she is forced to identify with the disesteemed of the country. And so much hinges on how he or she accepts that identification: as a burden or a boon. It doesn’t matter where an immigrant arrives from—Afghanistan or Angola, Mozambique or Myanmar, Serbia or Sudan—he or she knows who is at the bottom of American society, and all immigrants, including those who are “black,” try to distinguish themselves from a population and a category so freighted with negative meaning. An immigrant who has come to America to improve their station in life,

in other words, does not want upon arrival to be “put outdoors.”⁷ But it is precisely the people put outdoors who have paved the way for the black immigrant to find not only entry into the country, but also the possibility of a meaningful life exiled from home. Whoever appreciates that fact begins to see black not as a category of disesteem but the very category that has made America a reality, and a possibility around which coalesce the best ideals of the modern world, including the triad of liberty, equality, and solidarity. One meaningful way of becoming black for the African immigrant is to conceive of race not as an essential or prescriptive category, which applies to him or her by virtue of being African and phenotypically “black,” and by virtue of being in America, but rather to think of race as an *ethical* category that continues to underwrite modernity’s virtues. If Baldwin is right that “white [is], absolutely, a moral choice (for there are no white people),” then we have to consider, too, how we might conceive of *black* as a moral choice, with its own set of principles, acts, and feelings.⁸

I am not naïve: to accept blackness automatically as an ethical boon can be a tall order, since African immigrants, like others in the world enthralled by Hollywood, have fattened—or is it starved?—their imagination with black stereotypes and anti-black sentiment; and in the same way that black Americans have come to see Africa mainly through Hollywood’s eyes, Africans’ picture of black Americans has been filmed through the same racist gaze. Remember what Julia says in Baldwin’s last novel, *Just Above My Head*, when she returns to New York City after living in Abidjan:

A black girl in Africa, who wasn’t *born* in Africa, and who has never *seen* Africa, is a very strange creature for herself, and for everyone who meets her. I don’t know which comes first, or which *is* worse. They don’t know who they are meeting. *You* don’t know who they are meeting, either—you may have thought you did, but now, you know you don’t—and you don’t know who *they* are either. You may have thought you did, but you don’t. You don’t know a damn thing about any single day they’ve spent on earth. You go through the village, or the villages, but you don’t really see them—Hollywood threw acid in both your eyes before you were seven years old. You’re blind, *that’s* the first thing you realize is that you’re blind. Later you begin to see—something. And, then, you begin to see why you couldn’t see.⁹

I would venture to make a similar claim for the black boy in America, who wasn’t *born* in America, and who has never *seen* America: Hollywood also threw acid in his eyes and initially he cannot see black Americans without the myopia of the white gaze. Not only that, leaving an all-black country and coming to a majority white one, the black immigrant is forced to contend with that “peculiar sensation” DuBois so aptly defined over a century ago as “double-consciousness”: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹⁰ The African immigrant begins to realize, or must realize if he or she is to survive America, that the gaze with which they hold black Americans upon arrival is the same one through which white

America will view him or her during their stay, and either they have to liberate their gaze and begin to see black America without white contempt and pity, or internalize those feelings and begin to see themselves according to standards inimical to their psychic welfare.

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In her 2005 essay “Bye-Bye Babar,” Taiye Selasi, author of the widely acclaimed novel *Ghana Must Go*, charts the unfixed sense of origin and dispersal, and of home, felt by a new generation of Africans in the diaspora. The essay begins with a description of a motley crew of young black people dancing in one of London’s select clubs; then, Selasi observes:

Were you to ask any of these beautiful, brown-skinned people that basic question – ‘where are you from?’ – you’d get no single answer from a single smiling dancer. This one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra; that one works in Lagos but grew up in Houston, Texas. ‘Home’ for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on The African Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and the various institutions that know us for our famed focus. We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world.¹¹

I find Selasi’s Afropolitanism apt in characterizing a new generation of Africans whose fealty to a single nation is nonexistent. I think of my own self-identification: I am Ethiopian by birth and upbringing; I am also African American by experience and moreover by choice and by desire. As apt as it may be in describing someone like me, however, Afropolitanism is narrow in its descriptive and ethical scope, for it uses an elite class of African immigrants as synecdoche for the new African diaspora, and celebrates an identity shorn of ethical-political content. Afropolitanism is limited in its descriptive reach because it cannot—and does not yearn to—hail the thousands of Africans, for instance, who made the makeshift camp known as “the jungle” in Calais, or those arriving in Lampedusa on passages haunting in their echoes of the Middle Passage. Three summers ago while visiting Erbusco, Italy, I read and clipped out a short article in *The International New York Times* about a

boat seized by Italian authorities off of Catania, a seaport on the east coast of Sicily: “the boat’s other passengers . . . described a nightmarish crossing. Survivors said the crew had maintained order on board by ‘preventing people from emerging from the hold, where the air was unbreathable because there were so many people down there, along with the gas fumes from the ship’s motors’ . . .”¹² Afropolitanism may describe me, the Ethiopian, African American reading his paper on Lago d’Isèo in quiet leisure, but certainly not those Africans trapped in a ship’s hold, and so I have to ask what is my moral commitment to a term that characterizes only the experience of a new form of global African privilege and turns it into a virtue?

Also, in privileging Europe and North America, Afropolitanism further reifies a theory of the African diaspora as mainly a North Atlantic affair, failing to chart the new routes of contemporary black migration: say, the many thousands from the Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, Zimbabwe, and other African countries who have flocked to post-apartheid South Africa to make a new life there; or the Ethiopians who crowd the daily flights to Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Jeddah to serve as domestics in the Arabian peninsula. What is more, even within the North Atlantic context, given its focus on elites, Afropolitanism fails to account for our poor and working-class kin and kith, who are maids and nannies, taxi drivers and parking lot attendants, legal and illegal aliens, for whom ease of travel is significantly curtailed because of finances or lack of proper documentation or draconian laws. In short, we have to be careful not to confuse Afropolitanism with (Afro)Dollarpopolitanism, since the latter is a slippery ground upon which to base an identity with deep ethical and political meaning.

“We are Afropolitans. Not citizens but Africans of the world,” writes Selasi, a line that underscores for me how this iteration of Afropolitanism is lacking in ethical and political commitment. From David Walker’s 1830 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* to Claudia Rankine’s 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric*, I am reminded of a long line of black thought that bears out the significance of the word “citizen.” For modernity’s dispossessed to achieve citizenship was not simply a matter of inhabiting a place, but rather of possessing and advancing the civic and political rights and privileges from which they were deliberately excluded, and remain excluded. This is why I have a hard time abandoning the term citizen as an African American, given that word’s history and future aspirations, and also given that *ib,ʔ* [*zega*], the Amharic word for citizen, is the word we queer Ethiopians have chosen to name ourselves, a word born as a cypher of protection and out of a longing to belong. If Africa held a similar ethical-political impetus in the line “Not citizens but Africans of the world,” then perhaps I would not put so much weight on the word citizen, but it doesn’t. Africa is rendered more as a geographical and cultural category, and less a category imbued with the ethical-political drive of either Pan-Africanism or blackness.¹³

What undergirds Selasi’s Afropolitanism—and a point she draws out more fully in her TED lecture, “Don’t Ask Where I’m From, Ask Where I’m a Local”—is an identity as she says “lost in transnation” but found in the multi-local.¹⁴ “This new demographic—dispersed across Brixton, Bethesda, Boston, Berlin—has come of age in the 21st century, redefining what it means to be African,” and doing so in

a local way such that the category of the nation is too homogeneous to capture it with any real particularity.¹⁵ However true, what this framing downplays is how much the politics of immigration is waged at the national level, as the last U.S. election and recent elections all over Europe testify. Ultimately, what we glean from Afropolitanism is a deracinated blackness, uprooted from ethical and political moorings. Selasi is right that as Afropolitans, “how British or American we are (or act) is in part a matter of affect”—sure, but a lot rides on which acts and feelings, which histories, we choose to adopt.¹⁶ As new Americans, how we forge an identity imbued with ethical and political meaning, how we *choose* to be black, is a timely question—a question we can begin to broach, as briefly sketched here, using Baldwin’s insights.

Notes

- 1 If we take literature alone, from Chimamanda Adichie to Dinaw Mengestu, NoViolet Bulawayo to Teju Cole, writers with immediate ties to the African continent are not only revising the figure of Africa in the American imaginary, but also narrating the stories of record numbers of Africans who have immigrated to the U.S. in the past five decades.
- 2 Monica Anderson and Gustavo López, “Key Facts about Black Immigrants in the U.S.,” 24 January 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/24/key-facts-about-black-immigrants-in-the-u-s/ (accessed 1 March 2018).
- 3 Key scholarly texts on the remaking of European immigrants as white Americans include: Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1999); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White* (New York, Basic Books, 2005); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, Routledge, 1995).
- 4 James Baldwin, “Introduction: The Price of the Ticket” (1985), in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction, 1948–1985* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1985), p. xix.
- 5 James Baldwin, “Black English: A Dishonest Argument” (1980), in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York, Pantheon Books, 2010), p. 127.
- 6 James Baldwin, “On Being White . . . And Other Lies” (1984), in Kenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption*, p. 136.
- 7 I am borrowing the phrase “put outdoors” from Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) (New York, Plume, 1994), pp. 17–18.
- 8 Baldwin, “On Being White . . . And Other Lies,” p. 137.
- 9 James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (1979) (New York, Delta, 2000), p. 551.
- 10 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) (New York: Vintage/Library of America, 1990), p. 8.
- 11 Taiye Selasi, “Bye-Bye Babar,” *The Lip*, 3 March 2005, <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76> (accessed 15 February 2016).
- 12 Elisabetta Povoledo, “Captain and Crew are Held in Italy for Migrant Deaths,” *International New York Times*, 19 August 2015.
- 13 Although he casts his net slightly wider, Achille Mbembe’s definition of Afropolitanism also displaces the ethics and politics of blackness by making aesthetics the central criterion: “Afropolitanism is not the same as Pan-Africanism or *négritude*. Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity—which does not mean that it is

not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race and to the issue of difference in general." Achille Mbembe, "Afropolitanism," in Simon Njami (ed.), *African Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2007), pp. 28–9. See also, for a substantive discussion of Afropolitanism, its uses and misuses, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28:1 (2016).

14 Taiye Selasi, "Don't Ask Where I'm From, Ask Where I'm a Local," October 2014, www.ted.com/talks/taiye_selasi_don_t_ask_where_i_m_from_ask_where_i_m_a_local (accessed 15 February 2016).

15 *Ibid.*

16 Selasi, "Bye-Bye Babar."

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