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► **To cite this version:**

Brett Louis. The difference sameness makes. *Ethnicities*, 2005, 5 (3), pp.343-364.  
10.1177/1468796805054960 . hal-00571845

**HAL Id: hal-00571845**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00571845>**

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

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Vol 5(3): 343–364;054960  
DOI:10.1177/1468796805054960  
www.sagepublications.com

## The difference sameness makes

### *Racial recognition and the 'narcissism of minor differences'*

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the form and effects of differentiation that surface *within* the artifice of racial sameness. Using contemporary debates between 'native-born' and 'foreign-born' blacks in the USA over the right to 'African American' identity and the socioeconomic threat posed to the former by the latter, I show how the operation of the logic of race internally within a racial group reiterates familiar effects of racialization. Drawing on Freud's notion of the 'narcissism of minor differences' as a framing device, I point out that this difference/sameness relation is not simply antagonistic through an analysis of the ambiguity of Africa as posing a socioeconomic threat in the migrants it sends while also presenting the historical and symbolic basis for African American claims to cultural distinctiveness. The article builds a critique of the invention of sameness that makes difference in two key ways: first, through the representation of difference as an antithesis that affirms the racialized self characterized by sameness; and second, that this makes a political difference in the sense that this dialectic of black as self *and* other reifies the social problematic of its sameness/difference relation as intrinsically (intra)racial to the extent that the substantive socioeconomic causality of racial stratification and racism are obscured.

**KEYWORDS** African American ● black ● ethnicity ● race ● racism

It is above all the practical significance of men for one another that is determined by both similarities and differences among them. Similarity, as fact or tendency, is no less important than difference. In the most varied forms, both are the great principles of all external and internal development. In fact the cultural development of mankind can be conceived as the history of the struggles and conciliatory attempts between the two. (Georg Simmel, 1950[1917]: 30)

In the analytic of race, neither difference nor sameness can be sequestered, since both manifest, convey and inhabit each other. (Chetan Bhatt, 2004: 31 )

In August 2004, a *New York Times* cover article detailed a problem of racial differentiation notable in its unusualness (Swarns, 2004). During a public discussion on the need to develop projects to educate African Americans on prostate cancer a suggestion that African immigrants ought to be included was comprehensively rejected. Abdulaziz Kamus, the Ethiopian-born activist who had raised the question, voiced an obvious objection: 'But I am African and I am an American citizen; am I not African-American?' (Swarns, 2004: 1). After being informed that he could not claim such group membership and that the public health education project could not be expanded to meet his wishes, Kamus incredulously asked how he might accurately define himself.

This paradox of African American identification emerges from the basic fact that there are increasing numbers of black immigrants in the USA: for example, as at 2000, foreign-born blacks constitute 30 percent of the black population of New York City and 28 percent of that of Boston. In the attempt to understand and situate the significance of this development, the matter of *who* has the 'right' to African American identity has become a principal question. As Alan Keyes, the African American Republican candidate for the Illinois seat in the 2004 Senate elections, argued in positioning himself against his black Democratic opponent, Barack Obama – the son of a Kenyan father and white mother from Kansas – the basis of this right is asserted through the historical legacy of US slavery and the distinctiveness of slave ancestry instead of racial (read phenotypical) similarity.<sup>1</sup> One might surmise, therefore, that the location of Africa as a distant or not-so-distant homeland is of crucial importance. Furthermore, the black immigration trends and ensuing categorical opposition between black and African American fuels fears that these 'new-comers' might eclipse 'native-born blacks' – to this end the article cites the perception that black immigrants are aggressive competitors against native-born blacks for social resources and opportunities. And finally, this zero-sum situation is forcefully represented within the allied concern that 'newly arrived' black immigrants and their children will reap the benefits of hard-fought Civil Rights struggles: Henry Louis Gates's recognition that almost two-thirds of black Harvard students are either African or Caribbean immigrants or the children of African or Caribbean immigrants and that they ought to be emulated by African Americans instead of made 'scapegoats' serves as a potent case in point of the tension and anxiety surrounding certain concerns with black social identification.<sup>2</sup>

This example is striking in the attention it draws to the existence of divisive difference *within* a racial group usually assumed to be characterized by sameness. And although this dispute might be taken as predicated on notions of shared history, cultural similarity, and social solidarity analogous with ethnic as opposed to racial identification, we would do well to remember the symbiotic relationship between race and ethnicity, perhaps

especially pertinent to the USA.<sup>3</sup> But moreover, this dispute raises the question of the basis of such strong forms of racial recognition as well as the justification for its strict policing. Indeed, given the replacement of 'black' with 'African American' in much formal and informal US social discourse, the dialectic of attraction and repulsion in the symbolic appropriation of Africa begs explanation.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, what is the 'Africa' that is appropriated *and* rejected within black/African American racial identification and, more importantly, why?

This problematic vividly demonstrates the intricate character of what is now routinely referred to as the social construction of race and ethnicity. Within this abstracted mantra, the constitutive process of racial meaning making that emerges from the interface between external and internal processes of ascribed racialization and voluntary racial formation is brought into sharp relief. If the distinctiveness of racial sameness (such as native-born African American) creates and depends upon relational differences (such as with foreign-born black American) then the dialectic between sameness and difference is deeply significant. Because these relational categories are so close in many respects, especially the claim or myth of origin<sup>5</sup> central to the construction of African American, that their minor differences serve to solidify putative sameness, this sameness is not what it purports to be. This sameness is neither absolute – meaning exactly alike, similar, or *not different* – nor the 'changing same' brought into being via the routes of hybrid and syncretic ethnic cultures (Gilroy, 1993). Rather, it is a contradiction in terms whose pretence to insularity demands the incessant (re)production of, and interaction with, an intimately correlate other. In addressing this paradox, this article develops Freud's notion of the 'narcissism of minor differences' as the minute yet highly significant symbolic differences between individuals and groups to explore the antinomies of sameness and difference *within* racial group recognition and representation. Drawing on the US context in general, and the native-born African American/foreign-born black dichotomy in particular, I trace the trajectories of different groups' entry into the USA as a basis for the intra-racial anxieties over economic competition for scarce economic resources and opportunities. I then analyse the cultural claims and affective commitments that validate this internal racial differentiation and offer some observations on sameness as an irredeemable project. Finally, I consider a nuanced approach to difference that avoids the unproductive polarities of an absolutist vulgar ethnocentrism and an endlessly deferred and fragmented sense of being that is aridly insubstantial, but question whether this can be usefully appropriated in a racial sense.

## RACE AND THE 'NARCISSISM OF MINOR DIFFERENCES'

The social scientific explanation of race is a protracted affair. Within standard Marxian accounts, racial identification is an ideological effect of material social and economic processes (cf. Solomos, 1986). In its Althusserian sense, race is thus an 'epistemological obstacle' that promotes misplaced analytical investments in illusory racial categories that obscure the *real social processes* of racialized identities, relations, and practices. However, this view is criticized for its un-reflexive scientism that trivializes the practical efficacy of race. Instead, it is argued that manifest realities such as endemic social discrimination as well as the formation of racial communities forged in political struggle attest to the existence of race (Winant, 2004). In addition, there are also attempts to navigate a precarious position between these poles, accepting race as an ideological construct that is experienced as real and demands attention precisely because of its material effects (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

These accounts focussing on what race is as a reified or concrete object are (often tacitly) reliant on the work race performs as an affective order. This is to say that the extent to which race is or is not *felt* in an ontological sense is of immense importance. The intangible affective quality of race that is constituted as an emotive and intuitive sensibility resists dispassionate apprehension and becomes axiomatic: racial identity exists *because* it is subjectively felt as such and not simply because it exists empirically or as a social effect. To flesh this out conceptually, it is often argued that as race (and ethnicity) do not exist within nature but are constituted socially and culturally, they are situational, relational and comparative constructs instead of primordial (cf. Patterson, 1975). It is, however, notable that all of these adjectives denote or imply differentiation: race is a context-specific, relative and contrasting form. Leaving aside the visibly 'obvious' phenotypical signs of race for its representative historical, social, and cultural characteristics as outlined in the above example of African American identity, we confront a simple question: By which processes are the subjective criteria for the historical, social, and cultural artifice of race established?

An initial response to this question would identify processes of negation. Racial identification thus rearticulates hegemonic representations of inferiority: for example, the transformation of ascribed physical, intellectual, and moral deficiencies into venerable traits of beauty, intelligence, and civility. But establishing what one is not remains, to a certain extent, within the prior ontological universe of what one (falsely) was. It is, at best, a pragmatic consciousness of being-for-itself that is subject to structuring by external circumstance (cf. Sartre, 1989). This invites an affirmative project of internally establishing what one actually is as a metaphysical fact in the sense of being-in-itself that is autonomous and sincere. Now we know from Sartre (1989) that the establishment of such a coherent, essential subject is

difficult enough given the vicissitudes of consciousness and self-activity as well as a voluminous literature on the proliferation of options and constraints that produce social actors' identities. This complexity of recovering a complete selfhood, difficult enough at the individual level, is magnified during attempts to translate such local coherence onto that of a broader group. But with regard to racialization, it is precisely this process of invention and the situational, relational, and comparative dimensions of the affective order that produces race that is of interest. For example, the German romanticist literary movement including Goethe, Herder and Schiller that developed Germanic *Kultur* as an essence of national character that might also be understood as ethnic, can also be understood as a situational and comparative enterprise in relation to the status of Francophone and Anglophone bourgeois culture and court nobility (Elias, 1994: 3–28). As a paradigmatic case, this suggests that affirmative notions of essential cultural identity aspiring to establish a normative sense of being-in-itself are always situational, relational, and comparative. But instead of simply accepting the situational, relational, and comparative in a normative descriptive sense we are left to question the evaluations and judgments, implicit and explicit, within such distinctions that produce malignant effects from ostensibly benign accounts of difference (Wallerstein, 1990). Considering the iniquitous history of race, such an inquiry is of utmost importance.

The over-determination of group identity and action popularized within notions of racial community and collective behaviour has been usefully critiqued as reducing 'complex social and political processes' to an 'abstracted communitarian identity' and then mapped onto the 'theoretical phenomenology of an encounter between abstract subjects' (Bhatt, 2004: 18). Beneath this putatively social endeavour, Chetan Bhatt recognizes an important subjective constitutive aspect of group identification that reflects the very 'western' narcissism that is often criticized. Indeed, given that the perceived economic in-group/out-group competition between the 'native' and 'foreign-born' black US population discussed above is supplemented by ideas of cultural insiders and outsiders, the sameness that cements belonging is a symbolic unity that contains an important affective dimension. Freud's notion of 'the narcissism of minor differences' provides a useful framework for understanding the qualitative aspects of this tension between racial sameness and ethnonational difference. First presented as 'precisely the minor differences in people who are otherwise alike that form the basis of feelings of strangeness and hostility between them' (1917: 199), Freud later expanded this observation from the individual case to groups, stating that 'in the undisguised antipathies and aversions which people feel towards strangers with whom they have to do we may recognize the expression of self-love – of narcissism' (1921: 102). Later still, in 'Civilization and its Discontents' Freud, somewhat problematically, refers to the narcissism of minor differences as a 'convenient and relatively harmless

satisfaction of the inclination to aggression, by means of which cohesion between the members of the community is made easier' (1929: 114). Freud's inability to concretely understand why groups should be so acutely receptive to such 'details of differentiation' becomes problematic in the temptation to explain it as an 'elementary character' which is magnified by his summation of its benign form that disregards its pernicious effects (Ignatieff, 1997).

From the standpoint of human species unity, it is precisely the symbolic economy of minor phenotypical differences that nourished the classical biological notion of race. The recognition of superficial racial appearances as indicative of significant internal human species differentiation illustrates the limitations of an explanatory framework of human nature that elides the constitutive basis of race and its pernicious assumptions and effects. Nevertheless, Freud's recognition of the narcissism of minor differences as enabling group cohesion remains instructive for the argument here. His tentative categorization of this process of group formation and maintenance as an elementary human trait aside, it is possible to understand the narcissism of minor differences through more standard sociological forms of explanation as a social conflict between status groups who, in the example of native- and foreign-born black Americans presented above, happen to share a broad racial identification. Given the palatable contemporary 'heterophilic' forms of racism that depend on immutable and incommensurate notions of cultural difference that naturalize racial ontology (Taguieff, 2001), it is all the more important to consider the subjective processes and affective commitments through which racial identification is made and validated. Even when identified, these processes can be remarkably resistant to formal analytical critique; for example, the compelling totality of communal movements characterized by, amongst other factors, a set of cultural values that individuals identify intensely with, a communal metaphysics, and the reification of communal values and mythic history that help produce a key affective bond of an 'emotional community' (Wieviorka, 1995). Therefore, for an analysis of narcissism and differentiation, it is important to address various motivations such as fear, failure, defensiveness, protection and affirmation as well as material and symbolic processes.

### **SOCIAL STATUS AND THE ETHNIC PARADOX OF RACIAL SAMENESS**

Contested claims to African American identification are immediately noteworthy because they disturb the normative sense of distinctions *between groups* as forming the fundamental basis of racial particularity and group membership. On this impressionistic basis, intra-group differentiation is a

negligible factor evident along arbitrary lines such as personal tastes and inclinations. However, given the controversy over the ‘right’ to African American, the (often underplayed) internal dissimilarities such as class, ethnicity and nationality *within* racialized groups places the accepted notion of difference *between* races taken as proof of coherent racial categories – as well as the implicit internal group sameness – under a great deal of analytical and practical stress. It is, therefore, worth asking a simple question: What happens to the cogency of racial group identity when the presupposition of its constitutive internal similarity and external differentiation breaks down?

This question can be usefully engaged through a consideration of some contemporary debates on the constitution of blackness in the USA. If the development of ‘African American’ can be understood as a movement ‘into line with other “hyphenated Americans”’ (Banton, 1997: 20), the formative role of the term as denoting shared culturally distinctive group characteristics through a notion of a collective experience of racial subjugation at the hands of others analogous to the process of ethnogenesis recognized amongst, for example, Palestinians (Banton, 1997: 38, 80) raises the issue of authenticity and belonging. The salience of ‘African American’ has thus stimulated a debate – long implicit within migrant experiences of black African and Caribbean immigrants to the USA – on the character and content of ‘black’ within contemporary social and political discourse. While customary reference to ‘black’ as a global concept (in analytical and practical terms) presents it as a transnational phenomenon, the routes and networks of black diasporic movement towards the USA reflected in both established and recent migrants issue alternate understandings. It has been argued that the South–North migratory patterns accelerated during the early 20th-century have established a black diaspora *within* the USA (Neal, 1999) and the Great Migration to northern urban-industrial centres due to various push and pull factors are thus indicative of a particular (American) black experience that distinguishes them from those members of the international diaspora moving directly into those same urban enclaves. However, this basic descriptive difference of a black diaspora within the USA is not simply a formal distinction between internal/national and external/transnational migratory circuits, it is also strategically mobilized to assert an important qualitative division between the ‘native’ and ‘foreign-born’ black US population.

In a much-cited article, Toni Morrison (1993) addresses the popular notion that, when the choice presents itself, African and black Caribbean immigrants tend to identify ethnically as opposed to racially because they quickly realize that blackness is firmly positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy within the USA. Morrison argues further that immigrants adopt a ‘hostile position toward resident blacks’ in order to open the ‘Americanizing door’, which has the effect of firmly situating African Americans as the ‘real aliens’ and ‘nemesis’ of America despite the ‘ethnicity or nationality



of the immigrant' (1993: 57). While the affective basis of Morrison's robust critique is perhaps understandable it remains problematic. On one hand, the 'rejection' affected by some black immigrants might be more in relation to a perception of liberal and permissive *American* values and resisting *American* cultural assimilation than simply a reaction against *African Americans*; on the other hand, some narratives of black immigrants' separation – such as a West Indian entrepreneurialism – are myths that are unsupported by available research on levels of self-employment across the native- and foreign-born black American population (Reimers, 2005). In addition, it erroneously blames new immigrants 'of colour' for 'playing the ethnic card' instead of directing critical energy more profitably toward condemning the constricting choice between 'race', 'ethnicity', and 'exit' presented to immigrants as well as developing an understanding of the process of racialization as irreducible to 'Americanization' (Pessar, 2003: 26–7). And although it is an obvious enough point, immigrants and the second generation do not experience their racialization within the USA as a nationally bounded enterprise, but approach it relationally as mediated through 'cultural constructs and racial practices found in their countries of origin' (Pessar, 2003: 27). As such, the inescapable symbolic and practical centrality of race in US social life is not necessarily the case for Caribbean immigrants who, in many cases, begin to understand themselves as black or perceive a marked emphasis on their blackness only on entry into the USA.

This suggests that the social formation and meanings of blackness within the USA are subject to significant internal differentiation. While noting an 'intimacy derived from the commonalities of black histories' shared by blacks within the USA, Carolee Charles recognizes a tension where some Haitian immigrants encounter a not altogether unproblematic process of becoming 'black twice' (2003: 172). 'Being black twice' entails asserting a black subjectivity that is at once reflective of its past and responsive to its American present, however, Charles suggests that sustaining a transnational blackness within the US national context is difficult if not impossible: one cannot be American *and* Haitian but must choose, with the hegemonic position of the former often prevailing for the 'native-born' second generation. This is reminiscent of the unsatisfactory framework on migration outcomes as either permanent settlement or permanent return based on an ideology of allegiance to one nation state that implies unitary national belonging and is unable to account for the normalcy of dynamic transnational mobility and relations within the Caribbean example (Pessar, 2003: 23). However, in terms of the salience of 'black', what is most interesting here is that the struggle over 'African American' is as much, if not more, about access to social resources, the status and rights of ('native') citizenship, and a claim to the historical development of the nation than it is about blackness per se and the basis of racial belonging. And it is this very distinction that illustrates how the salience of 'black' as a coherent form of

racial sameness is crosscut, and in certain circumstances undermined, by forms of ethnonational differentiation such as African American. The dominant presentation of racial difference and its concomitant social antagonisms as referring to external dissimilarities between groups is, therefore, contested by this process of internal differentiation. Of course, the differences between African American and black are neither racial nor racialized somatically, nonetheless it begs the question of the production and management as well as the effects of difference per se *within* racialized groups.

Nonetheless, the significance of foreign-born migratory trends to the USA must not be overstated. If, as according to the *New York Times* (2004) article, the number of blacks with 'recent' sub-Saharan African 'roots' almost tripled and the number of blacks of Caribbean origin grew by over 60 percent, it must be remembered that the numbers themselves remain relatively small. A data sampling from the 2000 US Census (Malone et al., 2003) estimates the total foreign-born population at 31.1 million, which accounts for 11.1 percent of the total US population (counted at 281.4 million) and that 6.1 percent of this foreign-born population reported as 'Black or African-American alone'.<sup>6</sup> The foreign-born black population, therefore, accounts for roughly 1.9 million or 5.2 percent of the 36.4 million of the US population that identified as 'black, African-American or Negro'.<sup>7</sup> Whether this 5.2 percent constitutes a large and significant proportion of the black/African American population depends on a series of perceptions, including the level of economic threat they pose that is amplified by various factors including the tendency of immigrant populations to cluster in highly populous urban areas (US Bureau of the Census, 1999: 23–195).

Available evidence demonstrates the basis of this economic anxiety although, as raw data, it cannot offer an explanation for it. Figures for 2003 suggest that foreign-born workers in general have higher levels of labour force participation (74.5%) than the native-born population (63.2%) – however, the former are more highly concentrated within service occupations (23%) and production, transportation and material moving occupations (18%) than their native-born counterparts (15% and 12 % respectively) (US Department of Labor, 2004). In earnings data also collected by race and ethnicity, the median usual weekly earning of foreign-born workers is 76 percent that of the native-born, while for foreign-born blacks it is 99.8 percent of the median for native-born blacks – the corresponding figure for white foreign-born workers is 99.7 percent and 94 percent for Asian foreign-born workers; the figure for foreign-born Hispanic and Latina/o ethnicities is 76.1 percent. However, when calculated *per household* in the 2000 census, median earnings for African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Africans are \$33,790, \$43,650, and \$42,900 respectively. Taken in combination with respective figures of 11.2 percent, 8.7 percent, and 7.3 percent for unemployment and 30.4 percent, 18.8 percent,

and 22.1 percent for below poverty, the significance of these data is easily read: indeed, as one influential report put it, 'The [black] newcomers have numerous *advantages* compared to African Americans. Their own education levels and incomes tend to be higher. They not only typically live in somewhat different neighbourhoods, but in most metro areas these neighbourhoods have a higher socioeconomic standing' (Logan and Deane, 2003, emphasis added). However, the limits of sampling means that its figures can often only be taken as suggestive and even the statistical analyses of massive datasets such as a national census can only establish correlations between populations and outcomes without explanatory hypotheses. The ambiguity of the foreign-born black 'advantage' identified by Logan and Deane is a case in point: the foreign-born may be objectively and socially advantaged by various factors including education and domicile *or* these characteristics might give them an advantage over African Americans and have been achieved at the expense of African Americans. Despite the inability of datasets to provide an adequate causal account of foreign-born blacks' socioeconomic mobility in zero-sum relation to that of the native-born, in certain circumstances correlation can serve as evidence enough to justify anxieties over the 'threat' outsiders pose.

As we well know, such unsubstantiated social anxieties are characterized by the inflation of discrete incidents or absence of the very empirical objects that generate their concerns. In this sense, the significant role of economic restructuring in exacerbating the economic basis of racial stratification within US society provides the tangible structural context for such anxieties. The recent 'twist' in labour demand for the 'soft' skills essential to the information industries producing a preference for highly educated and skilled workers is accompanied by the manufacturing sector decline that has had serious implications for the low-skilled class of African American workers. This is evident in the spectacular decline in manufacturing throughout many major northern cities such as Philadelphia, Chicago, New York City and Detroit (Wilson, 1999: 46–8). Most ironically and importantly, the 'native-born'/'foreign-born' schism represents a form of diversionary 'moral panic' over undeserving outsiders that elides accurate explanations of racism. As an exemplary form of the latter, an assiduously detailed study (Brown et al., 2003) dismantles the colour-blind myth of racism as a past historical event that explains existing racial stratification as squarely attributable to individual failure and group culpability. Instead, they argue convincingly that racial disparities in access to high-quality social amenities such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare is the result of a systemic and pervasive undermining of black socioeconomic progress. Amongst other things, this provides a clear and compelling account of US racial stratification and the social immobility of African Americans as attributable to forces other than the activities of a small number of foreign-born migrants. But while it is perhaps tempting to explain this

misperception of the parasitical foreign-born as a classic divide-and-conquer manoeuvre, one is left having to explain the strong voluntarism and symbolic basis of the version of an African American self-image that opposes the foreign-born population.

## CULTURAL LEGITIMATION AND THE NARCISSISM OF RACIAL RECOGNITION

While it is possible to approach this as a classic in-group/out-group competition, it is worth noting that the playing field is not necessarily level. The general proportion of the foreign-born population that are naturalized US citizens have resided in the US for many decades: of the foreign-born population that entered before the 1970s, 81.6 percent became naturalized US citizens as opposed to 66.3 percent, 44.6 percent and 13.4 percent of those entering subsequently during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively (Malone et al., 2003). This means that the full status and rights of citizenship are not extensively held by recent foreign-born arrivals. With this in mind, the perception of foreign-born black immigration that serves as the basis of black intra-racial anxiety is perhaps compounded by low levels of citizenship amongst the recently arrived foreign-born population that presents their economic and social gains as somewhat illegitimate or unearned – achieved, as Toni Morrison puts it, ‘on the back of blacks’.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1985) argument that the hierarchical distribution of ethnic groups within the US ‘social space’ is linked to ‘seniority in immigration’, John R. Hall (1992: 269) argues that ‘previously coherent ethnic groups’ are subject to internal stratification along class lines such as the increasingly disparate socioeconomic positions of middle- and working-class blacks. Hence, in reference to the symbolic bases of group identity, Hall argues that ethnic groups can employ cultural capital in different ways: a form of cultural capital enables a representative force in the wider world while an alternate variety arranges internal group status. While distinguishing between its ethnic and class forms, Hall argues that cultural capital provides a useful metaphor ‘to understand struggles over status group boundaries and prestige’ (1992: 273). Considering Kamus’s lament – ‘Am I not African American?’ – the question of *who* can stake a rightful claim to African American is accompanied by the perhaps more important analytical issue of *what* are the symbolic resources that produce the African American ‘cultural distinctiveness’ necessary to support such an assertion?

Discussing the use of a cultural rationale to assert immutable racial essence in legal cases seeking to prohibit *and* protect forms of racial distinction, Richard T. Ford conceptualizes a socially pervasive ‘difference

discourse' that maps an allocated social (racial) identity onto an indeterminate but inherent (cultural) trait (2005: 28). Furthermore, 'Difference discourse describes social identities such as race as a manifestation of underlying differences – a racial culture – *while at the same time generating those very differences*' (p. 28, emphasis added). Developing an interesting analysis of the social production of group difference as analogous to Foucault's analysis of the 'repressive hypothesis', Ford argues that although 'the politics of difference can be understood as a reaction to the hegemony of integration and assimilation', its political validity is questionable if it 'threatens to become another hegemony, no less totalizing, no less obsessive, no less myopic than the assimilationist ideal that preceded it' (2005: 36).

For Ford, the emergence of increasingly covert forms of discrimination has repressed certain styles of social interaction resulting in 'a new bigotry – not types of people but ways of being' (2005: 37) that aims at transforming 'previously stigmatized groups' in a manner more totalizing than straightforward exclusion, which he sees as conversant with the project of bio-power elaborated by Foucault. Therefore, the 'repressive hypothesis' relating to Victorian attitudes as feigning the repression of sexuality in an attempt to mask an obsession with it that actually resulted in the production of sexuality thus defining individual behaviour and modern attitudes towards sex is mirrored within discourses on racial difference: thus, while the contemporary manifestations of 'difference discourse' are framed as a reaction to the repression of group difference, they are indicative of its very production. The efficient proliferation of social difference and identities along various lines such as racial, ethnic, and sexual, therefore, is not necessarily a realist reflection of difference that is objectively meaningful, but signifies 'the production of identity as a lifestyle, a way of being' (2005: 39). This produces a patina of solidarity that perniciously demands unthinking affiliation which bypasses and does not require moderated discussion and mediated resolution: it is already-existing because of the naturalizing effect of the cultural essence that it emerges from organically. In turn, this 'unearned solidarity' validates an unsustainable belief in the form and meaning of group membership that acts in a peculiarly didactic and coercive manner and orders assessments of authentic group behaviour from *within* the group. Epithets of inauthentic racial and ethnic subjectivities such as 'Oreo' and 'coconut' assert a specific normative ideal of group-appropriate belief and behaviour that promotes conformity and possesses an incontestable justification of the censure of deviations from it. This then has the important external effect of encouraging the inflation of group difference and the importance and salience of its reified immutable historical and cultural basis. The outcome of this, for Ford, is a grave situation where 'a right-to-cultural-difference will not simply leave people free from repression; instead, it will install a specific set of ideas about what it means to be

a member of whichever group the right “protects” (2005: 41). Furthermore, although such ‘rights’ can address deleterious social repression they dangerously reinforce common sense ideas about group specificity and difference that themselves act as disciplinary and regulatory forms (p. 42).

This is not to suggest that, within the US context of blackness, ethnonational difference trumps racial sameness. Indeed, it is precisely the conflicted dialectic between difference and sameness within timeworn processes of racialization turned internally onto group identification that demonstrates the tenuous basis of narcissistic self-understandings of group belonging and solidarity. While the relationship to Africa as a distant or not-so-distant homeland can serve as an exclusionary principle within the tightly policed boundaries of African American civil identity, it also provides the basis for an inclusive dynamic of racial sameness. The project of reconstituting such an expansive, transnational black identity is exemplified within the service provided by African Ancestry Incorporated that offers black Americans the opportunity to trace their African ancestry. For the sum of \$349, African Ancestry Inc. provides a home-testing kit for collecting a DNA sample which is then compared with a bank of genetic material including that gathered from 135 African groups. This ability to establish genetic commonalities with African peoples is presented as allowing black Americans an understanding of their ancestry in the important psychic sense of reconnecting them with their geographical, historical, and cultural roots by ‘reconstructing’ the ‘bridge to the past [that] collapsed with the advent of the slave trade’ (African Ancestry, n.d.).

This literal narcissism – in the descriptive sense of ‘self-love’ – is predicated on impracticable conditions of racial unanimity. The narcissism of minor differences central to cohering blackness is, therefore, necessarily Janus-faced: in order to establish its immutable essence throughout the Atlantic world and beyond, black *must* be a global concept – diachronic, diasporic, and totalizing. However, in order to assert its local salience, blackness *must also* maintain a parochial façade of unity to protect this ‘native’ integrity against its ‘foreign’ interlopers. But given that the ‘native’ and ‘foreign’ are collapsed within the broader racial category as formally equivalent, their crude separation within the narcissistic negotiation of difference generates an unfortunate effect. Instead of countenancing internal differentiation as acceptable forms of local deviation, it is abhorred as a corrosive force which produces a zero-sum blackness that is at once divisively split between global and local, self and other. These alternate black identities thus become locked within a circular dialectic of ambivalence; they are mutually reinforcing *and* antagonistic and, ironically, come to reflect the concomitant polarities of contemporary racial intolerance and prejudice that Pierre-Andre Taguieff (2001) recognizes as both ‘heterophobic’ and ‘heterophilic’. However, this dialectic is not an abstracted social morphology but is played out within concrete situations marked by indices of power.

The competing national and political positions from which this differentiation is fought out is mediated through social authority and rhetorical influence; therefore, the capacity to demarcate African American in an exclusionary sense towards foreign-born migrants is a potent resource. And it is precisely within this context that 'difference discourse' finds fertile ground as a means to prohibit and protect particular forms of external and internal racial differentiation.

Alongside the literal sense of narcissism as a vacuous and gratuitous self-absorption that carries a pejorative association, this dialectic of racial (self-)recognition can be considered in another way. Although by his own standards the 'narcissism of minor differences' is extremely underdeveloped and must be considered more a notion than a concept, Freud's broader psychoanalytical framework provides a useful explanatory context. Simply put, pathological or inchoate behaviours are not simply indicative of a wilful obduracy that can be diagnosed as a moral and rational deficiency but are rather symptomatic of unconscious psychic struggles. It is in this sense that the narcissism of racial recognition might be approached differently as a product of cultural trauma located within a collective (racial) identity. Jeffrey Alexander (2004), for example, advances a 'theory of cultural trauma' capable of building a reflexive sociological account of trauma as socially constructed events that reveal 'meaning struggles' instead of naturally existing phenomena. What is important in Alexander's formulation is his idea that events are not intrinsically traumatic but that trauma is socially mediated and ascribed to phenomena that may or may not have occurred. And, as sometimes highly imaginative, trauma construction is also a process of representation that 'seizes upon an inchoate experience from life, and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape' (2004: 9). Alexander thus focuses on epistemological concerns – the process and conditions under which claims to trauma are made – to initiate a sociological attempt to identify the conditions under which normative accounts of trauma are established. As a result, cultural trauma may be subject to the imaginative play of representation, understood as having a distorting effect on reality, and demonstrative of a peculiar rationality. This project is germane to the discussion at hand in this article in the form of the question of whether the narcissism of minor differences that produces the dialectic of internal racial sameness and difference might be accurately considered as a result of a traumatic effect. By extension, this implies that narcissistic racial (self-)recognition need not simply be a conceited egotism devoid of mitigating circumstance and/or redemptive possibility.

In Ron Eyerman's (2004) estimation there are significant reasons to accept African American identity formation as subject to constitutive traumatic effects. The catastrophic event of slavery issued traumatic effects well into its aftermath evident within African Americans' struggles for

representation and recognition within America as equal citizens before the state and human beings amongst others. Eyerman presents a compelling account of slavery as informing a collective African American identity through a collective consciousness transmitted within the public and private spheres through a variety of media. However, noting the heterogeneity of positions and interests within the black 'community', Eyerman also points to the responsibility and burden of representation assumed by black public figures such as artists and intellectuals. Crucial to an understanding of this dynamism is the selective and mediated process of this remembrance and representation which carries the power to speak and make visible that is conducted from privileged vantage points. As such, African American identification with a traumatic past is imaginatively reconstructed from an objective reality that, when translated by 'community' leaders and intellectuals, is 'tinged with a bit of strategic, practical, and political interest' (2004: 61). This returns us to a central dilemma engaged within this article: Does, or indeed can, this struggle for recognition justify the deleterious implications regarding the exclusion of foreign-born black Americans from identification and representation as African Americans? Stating that 'succeeding generations of American blacks have rediscovered their slave past and blackness with increasing intensity' (p. 110), Eyerman suggests that African American as a collective identity is moving forward toward progressive possibilities instead of retreating to the radical separatism of 1960s' nationalism. Citing a transformed approach to integration, Eyerman discerns 'the coexistence of a distinctive and relatively autonomous [African American] collective history and the progressive political and economic integration into an American society *that is also altered in the process*' (p. 111, emphasis added).

In its strict sense, the sociological theory of cultural trauma as presented by Alexander that eschews ontological and moral questions – the interrogation of the accuracy and justifications of actors' claims to trauma – appears to indemnify this transformation of African American identity from critique. However, Eyerman's own evaluative conclusions of 'progressive political and economic integration' forfeit this facility. First of all it is worth noting that Eyerman's research agenda is introspectively American and the situational, relational, and comparative dimensions of the affective order of African American identification is resolutely domestic vis-à-vis other *established* American racial populations. While this is entirely legitimate in terms of presenting a historical sociology of trauma effects, analytical problems arise when one considers the alteration of contemporary American society through its contact with a progressive, assertive African American collective identity. The location of the foreign-born *after history*, so to speak, within an America that only progresses through historical aftershocks emanating from within its own boundaries suggests the cessation of meaningful immigration or migrants – a not entirely



unfamiliar refrain in certain conservative circles seeking to limit present and future immigration. Furthermore, this presupposition all but ignores the transnational hybridity of black ethnicities which further reinforces the USA's hegemonic position as the site of paradigmatic blackness that is amplified within the circuits of cultural globalization (Sansone, 2003). Within such a rigidly local setting, the analytical and practical abuse of trauma remembrance through misappropriation is unsurprising: in local hands serving local ends, the cultural trauma 'defence' becomes an indiscriminate instrument in the pursuit of retributive as opposed to redistributive justice that results in significant collateral damage that includes foreign-born black Americans. Although this view informs the flawed and specious conservative critique of affirmative action and quotas (Brown et al., 2003), it is worth considering only because of the un-reflexive zero-sum approach to rights that it also represents. From a progressive point of view, if the native-born right to social opportunities and resources is necessarily achieved at the denigration of foreign-born others, then the political defensibility and moral worth of such rights demands (re)assessment.

### LIVING WITH *DIFFÉRANCE*

Considering this divisive parochialism the only salient analytical approach to claims to racial recognition is to uncover and assess their underlying motivations and interests. This entails evaluating particular references to difference and sameness as claims to representation and recognition instead of accepting racial identity as predicated on immutable social facts, intrinsic historical and cultural identities, or necessary political strategies.

Histories, structures, and relations of racial stratification and racism have produced the material and symbolic processes of exclusion and stigmatization from which 'difference discourse' is an understandable, if regrettable, outcome. And given the normative social status of race and its immutable cultural essence, racialized social justice agendas can easily become reducible to a racial politics. In this vein, introspection and auto-critique as well as severe reservations over the salience of racial identity are characterized as an apolitical disengagement with the 'real world' and practical lives of ordinary people (Noguera, 2003). However, this putative *reality* of social structures and relations, identities and actors presents difference and sameness as objective facts, obscuring the naturalizing process within difference discourse that is reinforced by the moral and rhetorical authority gained from its 'somber and weighty sanctimoniousness, which has intimidated those who might puncture its pretensions and deterred deserved critique' (Ford, 2005: 211). If, as I have argued, difference and sameness can be strategically constructed and mobilized in specific contexts

to particular ends – such as the use of Africa to reinforce *and* undermine black diasporic unanimity – then the specific political terms of their form and function is of central concern. This is all the more prescient given Ford's political apprehensions about difference discourse: 'The focus on difference diverts attention from racism . . . and instead misleadingly suggests that racial injustice is primarily the result of objective and intrinsic difference among natural racial groups' (2005: 31).

While the ontological ideal of racial sameness cannot be usefully rehabilitated, the significance of racialized difference presents a separate quandary. As laudable as they are, contemporary academic research agendas concerned with the critique of ontological authenticity often assume 'difference' to be inherently iniquitous. Cautioning against this entire rejection of difference as an efficacious concept by highlighting the significance of power and resistance within the incessant (re)making of identity, Stuart Hall (1990) notes that difference, metaphorical and real, represents an actual sentient and material past. The terrors of colonialism and Atlantic slavery, for example, are indisputable realities and their social traces, filtered through processes of representation, have a differentiating effect. This, in combination with their perception as meaningful and significant, means that the representation of difference cannot be dismissed lightly. This, then, intimates the need to develop a reflexive understanding of difference that produces categories that are neither intrinsically real nor typically insular in character. In this regard, Hall's (1990: 229) approach to cultural identity through Derrida's concept of 'différance' as the production of meaning through the interaction between difference and deferral is instructive here. For Hall, cultural identity is never a pristine and stable concrete reality but is produced and positioned through the representation of difference that is continually transformed. Therefore, as its 'positioning' is of crucial importance, 'difference' per se is not inherently problematical, but rather the analytical and political work that is often expected of it.

In relation to its positioning, Lorenzo Simpson eschews the unproductive customary opposition between difference as 'invidiously ethnocentric' as with homogeneous notions of 'community' or as 'uninterestingly thin' as in the heterogeneity of 'fragmented' difference (2001: 10–11). Instead, he advocates a 'situated cosmopolitanism' as a communicative discourse framed by an ideal of 'mutual understanding'. This project foregrounds the dialogic possibility of the 'reversibility of perspectives' that, apropos Gadamer, produces a 'fusion of horizons' which transforms instead of extinguishes difference and enables 'something new' to be recognized. Such a mutually respectful interaction attempts to forge a language that enables 'noninvidious and mutually critical cross-cultural representation' (2001: 81) that would, ideally, offer a transformative and edifying pedagogical encounter for all parties. As the resultant representations of difference within this dialogue are reflexively constituted and characteristically

provisional, the telos of Simpson's project is 'not agreement . . . but mutual understanding' (p. 88), and signals the instantiation of a 'moment of common humanity' specifically oriented towards the 'noninvidious representation' of difference. But as a consequence, this problematizes the efficacy of racialized difference: given its primary – if not sole – cultural basis, difference 'does not *require* a racial substrate or a *racialized* line of transmission' (p. 135). Indeed, the representation of fluid *différance*, as (re)produced in and through culture, need – and ought – not be collapsed into historical connections with a given race.

Ultimately, such a provisional sense of difference or *différance* brings the very efficacy of strong racial identification as fact instead of process into question, especially when the antithesis of sameness that sustains it is shown to be an indefensible and pernicious construct. This reflects the dilemma posed within Chetan Bhatt's understanding of the insoluble bond between racial sameness and difference presented in the above epigraph. And, in a prescriptive vein, it invokes the prospective 'imperialism of identity' advocated by K. Anthony Appiah (1996). Appiah expresses a notable concern with the incapacity of racial identity to express anything other than prosaic dissimilarity (say skin colour) that is intrinsically insignificant, or reified ontology (say attitudinal and behavioural homogeneity) that is dangerous in the compelling reality it is taken to reflect and not invent. This invites the 'imperialism of identity' and presents hard choices regarding the salience of racial (self-)identification, which cannot escape the relations of power within which self-representation and social recognition are framed: As *all* native-born African Americans clearly do not harbour animosity towards the foreign-born population, is this cleavage newsworthy because journalists have suddenly become critical theorists of race, or does it present an opportunity to use race as proof of natural racial hierarchies *and* the amelioration of racism?

If the native-/foreign-born dispute over African American identification has its material basis in perceptions of socioeconomic competition, its symbolic foundations and justification reflect the disingenuous processes of racialization in its classical form. Within the racial paradigm, ostensibly benign descriptions of difference and sameness are never that but placed in hierarchical order through their relationship to each other. And, as an irregular example of *internal* racial differentiation that ought to puncture the salience of race, the effect of the native-/foreign-born dichotomy is often the opposite. Thus, the foreign-born are not racial and demonstrate a *culture* of industry and discipline, while the native-born are taken to represent a 'culture of poverty' that is innate to their character and are therefore *racial*. And when the foreign-born are resituated as racial in relation to their putative successes and socioeconomic mobility, they prove that the engagement of racism is unnecessary: racism can therefore be dismissed as an unfortunate event now happily consigned to the past and the travails of the

native-born are explicable as individual failings and collective torpor. Beneath all of this lies a valuable lesson: that the conceptual and practical ‘death’ of race and ascent of ethnicity announced an aeon ago (UNESCO, 1952) and frequently restated has failed to become doxa should tell us something: an awareness of the analytical exhaustion of race has not weakened the energy of the affective investments it enthralls. Therefore, from whatever vantage point we occupy to promote and witness the spectacle of race either limping along in chronic ill-health to its final death or retaining vital life signs, our attempts to understand the symbolic and material meanings of racialized identification might usefully pause for reflection on the substantive, ethical, and political basis of that identity as well as the activity of making and inhabiting it.

### Notes

- 1 Obama emphatically disputes this as a nationally narrow and limiting idea of blackness: ‘I can’t even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience . . . [but] I can embrace my black brothers and sisters, whether in this country or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all our various struggles’ (2004: xvi).
- 2 See Henry Louis Gates’s speech, ‘America Behind the Color Line’ (Gates, 2004).
- 3 The dialectic between difference and sameness discussed in this article is played out across race and ethnicity. Because the two are supposed to be constitutively and functionally different, I have decided to consider them separately and in articulation in relation to a narcissistic appropriation of sameness and difference instead of opting for an ostensibly more accurate ethnoracial category. My concern is less with the ‘accuracy’ of the conceptual category, but its practical and affective formation, the analytical work it performs, and the social distinctions it helps draw.
- 4 It must be noted that the campaign to adopt ‘African American’ in the late 1980s especially was far from universally supported amongst black Americans. Therefore, the arguments raised in this article pertain towards a specific version of African American self-identification that is ambivalent towards Africa and apprehensive towards the ‘foreign-born’ black US population and is not a judgment of reference to African American in a general sense.
- 5 I refer to this as a myth not in the sense of a pervasive falsification, but in terms of the privileging of one determining line of descent consonant with the one-drop rule instead of enumerating the genealogical complexity characterized by differing ‘racial’ heritage. Of course, this error is not that of African Americans per se but is the effect of a classical racialism based upon a strong notion of race as distinctive hereditary types.
- 6 However, 23.5 percent of the ‘foreign-born’ population reported ‘two or more races’ of which a percentage can be assumed to include black or African-American.
- 7 It is worth noting that 1.7 million or 4.8 percent of those reporting as ‘black, African American or Negro’ did so ‘in combination’ with another race.

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