The Politics of Identity: The History of African Americans Reconsidered through Narratives

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Abstract

The narratives are a means of sharing each other's experiences, linking people in time and event over the generations. As such are the narratives of African Americans who have the stories of slavery and freedom that helped them to form their identity as Americans. Thus, the present paper attempts to shed light on the definitions of identity politics and how African Americans come across the experience of slavery, reconstruct their shared history and ultimately attain their identity in the mainstream American life.

Identity politics, within the scope of a narrative of memory, evolves over time and is subject to the influence of history and the recognition of difference. The collective memory, like individual memory, is a function out of which discourses become a part of the individual. Thus, memory is one of the ways that the human consciousness connects experiences and images through a language use. The concept of an African American identity was articulated in the latter decades of the nineteenth century by a generation of black intellectuals for whom slavery was a thing of the past, not the present. It was the memory of slavery and its representation through history in the narrative works that grounded an African American identity. In this sense, the American slavery was traumatic that united all the African Americans in the United States. It formed the root of an emergent collective identity through an equally emergent

collective memory of a race, a people, or a community. It is this discourse on the collective and its representation that is the focus of this paper.

Writing on the slave history is not the only task of historians, but it is also done by creative writers now, who write about the past in order to establish a tradition for the present. The slave narrative can be taken as an example for such writing. African Americans consider their narratives as a bridge between the past and the present because their narratives retell and rewrite the history of slavery. Slave narratives use African American people's experience of horrors in slavery as a door to history remembered.

The narratives or stories are produced in order to be recounted to others. A culture's stories create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audiences. More importantly, the encounters are planned to allow participants to share their life stories with one another and together. They are also planned to look for ways to decrease hatred and violence between two peoples and increase understanding of the other. For example, the stories about the African Americans often include experiences of slavery, life in the plantations, and dreams of enjoying freedom that are shareable among all Americans.

With reference to the meaning and place of slavery in the formation of an African American identity, the focus on representation was not meant to underestimate the real suffering this involved. Here, the collective identity formation has been linked with collective memory, seeing memory as a signifying practice and as a cornerstone of group identity. When the members of a specific subgroup unite in order to affect a political or social change, the result is often called id*entity politics*. "Native Americans and, of course, slaves," as D. E. Hall (2004)

says, "were categorically excluded from the group of 'Men' with unalienable rights" (p. 36). During slavery, such degradation affected the self-identities of individuals long denied access to economic resources, political rights, education, and even basic recognition as human beings. In general, the identity politics is not limited to the major racial or gender divisions of time, but it extends into sexual orientation, ethnicity, citizenship status, and other instances where a specific group feels marginalized or oppressed.

The phenomenon sometimes derisively referred to as identity politics primarily appeared during the politically tumultuous years, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965. For the Americans, both the whites and the blacks, as D. E. Hall (2004) says, "Jacobs's and Douglass's experiential bases allowed them insights unavailable to Emmanuel Kant, John Locke, and others. Indeed, with these writers and their contemporaries we find one of the birthplaces of identity politics as we know it today" (p. 37). The identity politics is, thus, the result of dehumanization of African Americans under slavery and its aftermath. Whereas much of the attention was focused on the plight of disenfranchised African Americans, other groups also sought recognition and acceptance through political activism and collective awareness. Other groups such as the legal Hispanic immigrants or Native Americans were also empowered through identity politics. The idea was for marginalized or oppressed groups to be recognized *for* their differences, not in spite of them. By identifying himself or herself as an African American or a homosexual or a feminist, a person could focus all of his or her energies on a specific political cause. This singularity of purpose appears to be the most positive aspect of identity politics.

In literature, an individual's identity, whether cultural or individual, has an impact on how he or she views himself or

herself, the world, and even the literature he or she reads. For example, African American literature is influenced by how the African American writers perceive themselves and the world around them. As a result, identity is an important study in African American literature.

In recent years, the scholars working in a remarkable array of social sciences and humanities disciplines have taken an intense interest in questions concerning identity. Within political science, for example, the concept of identity is placed at the center of lively debates in every major subfield. The students of American politics have devoted new researches to the identity politics of race, gender, and sexuality. In comparative politics, identity plays a central role in work on nationalism and ethnic conflict (Horowitz, 1985, p. 27). In international relations, the idea of state identity is at the heart of constructivist critiques of realism and analyses of state sovereignty (Wendt, 1992, p. 399). And, in political theory, the questions of identity mark numerous arguments on gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and culture in relation to liberalism and its alternatives (Taylor, 1989, p. 49). Compared to the recent scholarship in history and the humanities, however, the political scientists remain laggards when it comes to work on identities. Due to influences ranging from Michel Foucault to the debate on multiculturalism, historical and cultural constructions of identities of all sorts have lately been a preoccupation for both social historians and students of literature and culture.

Despite this vastly increased and broad-ranging interest in identity, the concept itself remains something of an enigma. What P. Gleason (1983) observed in 1983 remains true today: "The meaning of 'identity' as we currently use it is not well captured by dictionary definitions, which reflect older senses

of the word. Our present idea of 'identity' is a fairly recent social construct and a rather complicated one at that" (p. 921). Even though everyone knows how to use the word properly in everyday discourse, it proves quite difficult to give a short and adequate summary statement that captures the range of its present meanings.

Identity is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed "social or collective" and "personal or individual." In the former sense, identity refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and alleged characteristic attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, identity is some distinguishing characteristics that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more or less unchangeable.

Identity is socially constructed and constantly changing. Race, class, gender and sexuality are all components of an individual's identity and are critical in the formation of his or her lived experiences. K. Millett (1990) defines politics in terms of "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (p. 23). When the terms 'identity' and 'politics' are combined together, they might be defined as an observance of difference as a result of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Observing differences allows those who are marginalized an opportunity to challenge white supremacy and demand their rightful place as part of the national narrative. In this way, the identity politics theory acts as a component of multiculturalism, feminism, and critical pedagogy.

The identity politics, however, is not a panacea. The identity theorists acknowledge that there are obvious problems with using a theory that maintains "the personal is the political"

(Giroux, 1992, p. 162). For example, the identity politics can promote essentialism as well as separatism. Amongst white feminists, essentialism manifests itself through "hierarchies of identities and experiences, which . . . privilege . . . their own form of oppression and struggle" (Giroux, 1992, p. 173). K. W. Crenshaw (1995) agrees with Giroux; yet, she adds the following two problems with identity politics: 1) It does not recognize individual differences of the persons within an identity category, and 2) It does not consider the interlocking affect several identity categories might have on an individual (p. 377). Similarly, L. Bredella (Winter, 2000) is of the opinion that "identity politics leads to regarding the other not as an individual but as a member of his or her group, and tends to define the collective identity of one group in contrast to that of other groups" (p. 341). Despite the negative aspects of identity politics, the importance of identity development amongst the African Americans remains uncontested.

According to A. D. Davis (1997), the racial groups excluding the whites form their identities "around shared cultural norms, common histories of immigration, mythologized homelands, or racial oppression" (p. 237). The whites, however, assume racial superiority even as they tend to believe they have no racial identity. Davis (1997) further explains, "White Americans do not appear to have a sense of racial identity that is not linked to ethnicity or class, unless juxtaposing themselves against blacks, Asian Americans, or sometimes Latinos/as" (p. 231). Morrison's book, noted for having revived new interest in critical race theory and whiteness, argues that white racial identity is forged in opposition to blackness (Morrison, 1992, p. 9).

K. Mostern (1999) claims that the identity politics theory is "always already identified with women of color" (p. 4). As a

result, the identity formation for the blacks appears to be slightly different from their white counterparts due to the intersectionality of race and class as well as societal messages that devalue and debase the people of color and the poor. In this sense, being born a black and female automatically differentiates one from others, particularly the whites. S. Erkut et al. (1996) agree with Mostern's view of racial identity: "For white girls, gender may indeed be the principal site for struggle and negotiation in terms of personal identity and social place. For girls of color, culturally and linguistically different girls, working-class girls, and girls living in poverty, gender is not the only site for struggle and negotiation, nor is it necessarily the most salient site" (p. 57). "In a racist society," according to L. Bredella (Winter, 2000), "people attribute certain cognitive, psychological and moral qualities to the color of the skin" (p. 339). In history, qualities attributed to the people of color, particularly the blacks, have been negative and quite harmful. Even the immigrants who enter the United States, especially those who closely resemble the American blacks, have often felt compelled to disassociate themselves from the black Americans.

The notion of an African American emerged as part of the efforts of the generation of black intellectuals who were rejected by the American society even after the end of the Civil War. It was in 1865, as C. W. E. Bigsby & R. Thompson (1998) note,

> That the black American entered history, in the sense of being able to control his or her own experience and, at least potentially, deflect the course of the social and political system which was now required to take cognizance of that freedom, even to the extent of legislating against its too effective utilization.

> Slavery may have fed, clothed and sheltered him adequately, organized his work, trained him in artisan and agrarian skills, even treated him less cruelly than Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1952), had imagined. (p. 153)

Slavery, as a form of memory, was a focal point of reference in this process of making identities of African Americans. The dominant white society was in the process of re-interpreting the war which had torn the nation into two and slavery was consigned to the margins of importance along with the former slaves.

This was seen as necessary to processes of reconciliation aimed at bringing the divided nation back together. Yet in terms of the lives led by most African Americans today, C. W. E. Bigsby & R. Thompson (1998) have this view to say that

> The dawn of the twenty-first century has not ushered in the economic, social and educational equality for which they yearned. Some part of Martin Luther King's 'dream' has been achieved, but not all. The American Dream remains less accessible to many African-Americans – still labouring under the accumulated burdens of history and slavery – than to the waves of immigrants still arriving in pluri-cultural America from poverty, oppression or displacement elsewhere. (p. 176)

For the marginalized group, this reconciliation meant a crisis of identity and identification. In this regard, a question as such can be raised here: Who were they, who were neither white nor fully-accepted Americans? It was here that the notion of an African American was put forward, along with the idea of a New Negro a little later.

The succeeding generations of American blacks have collectively formed themselves and renegotiated their relationship to the dominant society with slavery as a backdrop. "The History of the Negro," as Du Bois (1989) concludes, "is the history of this strife" (p. 3). It is this strife and sense of doubleness that much African American expression in arts, literature, and music has gone on to express. This process, for example, occurred on the normal fields of politics through organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), political parties, social movements, and other extra-institutional means. It also occurred in the cultural arena through struggles for representation and recognition. In all areas and arenas, the past is always the present.

In this sense, through the history and memory of slavery, the African Americans create their identities. One of such narratives is the slave narrative, which was intended to do much more than just to narrate a history of injustice. It was a declaration of literary and social independence. It was simultaneously an assertion of selfhood and a set of political propositions. As such, in their novels, the African Americans rewrite a history, which have long been ignored and marginalized, making identities of them.

To conclude, the narratives of African Americans oppose the domination of hegemonic history and memory by confronting the importance of memory as a search for individual and collective identity continues. The use of individual memory in the narratives of African Americans sharply contrasts with public memory or family history found in the slave narratives. Their subjective treatment of memory enables the narrator to establish a relationship with the African Americans' identity.

In addition, the narratives imply an interpretation of history that

at times severs its connection to memory. The search for identity in the narrative is combined with a history of Africa. For example, memories reconstructed in Morrison's novels accomplish a reflexive revision of the past in such a way that the value and purpose of retrospection become central to their mission. Her narratives define the inventive function of memory as a primary source for understanding how differing versions of the past are reconstructed. Memory, as such, is the process by which the quest for identity becomes the search for an individual's own history. By producing the alternate narrative patterns to those of the mainstream, their writing provides openings for other narratives, other versions of history, which are precipitated by memory and are reinforced by remembering.

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