

To Talk or Not to Talk, Should that Be the Question?
How the Double Jeopardy of Race and Nationality
Influence My Experiences in Academia

Nickesia S. Gordon
Barry University



In the field of literature, Hamlet's often parodied statement "to be or not to be," reflects the prince's dark contemplation of whether to end his life or continue an increasingly tortured existence. His father has been murdered and Hamlet is charged with avenging his death. For those who know the story, this is a task that renders Hamlet immobile. He cannot act and internalizes his impotence in dramatic suicidal fashion. In several respects, I am Hamlet, caught up in my own existential crisis of trying to determine who I am and how to represent a coherent self in academia. The discussion that follows pivots around two specific aspects of my identity to illuminate the complexities of representation, namely my Afro Caribbean/"third" world background and my historically Black university (HBCU) affiliation.

As Grossberg, Wartella, and Whitney (1998) note, people have always sought to ground themselves and represent who they are to others in meaningful ways. However, the process of self-representation in any socio-cultural context is never straightforward. For example, the idea of representation is always troubled by its ruthless binary, misrepresentation. It is also subject to the demands of "authenticity." It is not surprising therefore that the politics of representing oneself are often mired in essentialisms. Typically there is a discursive expectation that there is a "correct" way of presenting oneself or that there is a "true" identity to embody. The subjective nature of these expectations is sublimated and the objectivity that they assume often creates an existential crisis not unlike that expressed by Hamlet's dismal musings. While individuals may not be considering suicide, they struggle with the dilemma of how to be, especially in contexts that demand some universal or natural state of being. My context is that of academia and as an Afro Caribbean person, the expectations of who I am or should be have sometimes overwhelmed and bewildered me. For instance, I am often identified as African American because of my skin color. As a result, there is often an assumption among many I encounter in academia that I intrinsically align my personal politics with that of the African American community. However, that is not necessarily true, particularly because of the xenophobia I have encountered from some members of that community due to where I come from. I am invariably taken aback by this rejection whenever it happens because psychologically, that is where my emotional affinity resides. I do feel some sort of kinship because of our shared heritage of discrimination based on African slavery in the Americas.

As a Caribbean person of color who came to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies, my academic identity is marked by my "first" as well as "third" world educational

experiences, which further position me betwixt the precarious borders of insider/outsider. Concepts of “first” and “third” world are steeped in the developed/underdeveloped binary created by global financial institutions, such as the World Bank, which through economic policies have traditionally promoted the assumption that people from “underdeveloped” or “third world” societies are inferior because they are unsophisticated and often in need of Western modernization (Biccum, 2002). As I note elsewhere (Gordon, 2011), Afro Caribbean female scholars are often invited into the academic spaces of American college campuses through scholarships, grants, and fellowships, or are hired as faculty. These academic awards and employments become gateways through which we are invited to become insiders in a “first” world space. However, this insider status is distinguished by boundaries which delineate “the limits of place, space, and territory” (Patton, 2004, p. 191). According to Patton (2004), boundaries serve to maintain hegemony because of their inherent design to include or exclude. They also have the ability to shape social relations through establishing the dichotomy of “us” or “them,” insider or outsider, and in the case of Black Caribbean female scholars, American or foreign, but more precisely, developed or underdeveloped. These boundaries also translate into intellectual hierarchies of superior and valued knowledge versus inferior and less valued knowledge. Those from developing societies are viewed through an ethnocentric lens by segments of American society that strongly believe in the superiority of their national culture and the inferiority of others (Gordon, 2011).

Many times I find myself caught between my insider status, represented by my Assistant Professor role, and my outsider status, represented by my Afro Caribbean female identity. For example, I have been in situations where gross stereotypes about peoples from developing countries were iterated without regard for the fact I, a colleague, am one of “those” people. More specifically, references would be made to the inferiority of the academic training received by such persons who may have studied at non Euro-American institutions. Crude jokes, or more precisely, thinly veiled threats, have also been made at my expense regarding my immigration status (by one former colleague in particular).¹ The threat was implied because of this individual’s power to affect institutional decisions regarding my immigration paperwork and subsequently, my future ability to be employed at a U.S. institution. This colleague would randomly pop in my door to “jokingly” announce from the student populated hallway that he would do everything in his power to stop the USCIS² from coming onto campus and carting me off for deportation. I am always shocked and embarrassed at such comments and their ideological implications, which infer my outsider/inferior status; however, in each instance, I am immobilized by the indecision of whether to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to what transpired. I catch myself ruminating, like Hamlet, about what would be the appropriate thing to do given my position as an Assistant Professor (insider) who wishes to be collegial and protect herself as well as a “third” world woman (outsider) who was incredibly offended.

In other situations, it is my cultural self that is sometimes called into question: “Why don’t you sound (look, act, etc.) more Jamaican?” From a former colleague, “Why are you advocating more for the Black students?” From a former African American student,

"Why aren't you advocating more for the Black students?" A different colleague asked, "Why aren't you more deeply associated with the Caribbean Students' Association?" In essence, everyone seems to ask, albeit in different ways, why I am committing so many cultural transgressions. In the end, I do and say nothing and my impotence shames and enrages me. In these moments, I am keenly aware of the limitations and liminality of my position even though I am "included" in the academy.

The second point of discussion regarding my representation of an "authentic" self comes from my experiences as a graduate of a prominent HBCU. There is a general expectation among many, especially those of color, that HBCUs promote a particular racial politics. Research has indicated that students attend HBCUs for reasons that include a desire to be with other students of color and the opportunity for active racial self-development (Van Camp, Barden, Sloan, & Clarke, 2009). I have recognized during my short career in academia that being a graduate of an HBCU presupposes to others what my racial politics ought to be. The typical expectation, especially from colleagues of color, is that I am first and foremost a "race woman." What this translates to is that race is, or should be, the primary lens through which I relate to others, meaning Caucasian Americans. Yet as previously stated, my identity politics are marked by my xenophobic experiences with people of color in the U.S. and therefore "differentiates" my relationship to racial politics in this country.

Coupled with the idea that I should espouse some universal Black political thought is the underlying assumption that students who attend an HBCU leave with a monolithic educational and political experience. To the contrary, as Guy-Sheftall and Cooper (1997) observe:

The students at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are far more heterogeneous than they may appear.

While race and class may be dealt with adequately at HBCUs, there are silences about other diversity issues, especially gender and sexuality [and I would add nationality].

However, these realities do not prevent the formulation of expectations to the contrary. When my behavior violates expectations, I have felt the sting of reproach and rejection from other colleagues of color when, for instance, I fail to participate in the demonization of "White folk" or refuse to read race as the primary cause of every perceived slight. Subsequently, my positionality makes me subject to being read as a "sellout" given the expectation that my racial politics should be more "militant" based on my HBCU background.

These situations create much angst for me as I often question the discomfort I feel being around such "race" talk. Shouldn't I be more supportive in these discussions? Have I become an "Uncle Tom?" These thoughts do violence to my psyche and I am left unsure of exactly how to reconcile an "authentic" self. In truth, my experience at an HBCU was more affected by national consciousness than it was racial consciousness. I have suffered injustice, but not just at the hands of those who are White; I have been

marginalized by U.S. American people of color as well. As a result, my response to oppression is not racialized in the same way that it may be for African Americans. As Collins (2002) points out, people from different racial groupings may have similar gendered interpretations of an experience, yet their diverse racial standpoints and pasts create distinctly different experiences. My national origin adds a layer of differentiation which represents a more nuanced cultural dimension of marginalization. I therefore cannot participate in these discussions in the same ways as my U.S. American colleagues of color. However, I am at odds as to how to represent this to my cohorts without seeming like a traitor. To talk or not to talk becomes a perennial internal struggle as I battle with the cultural, political, and emotional parts of myself, trying to determine which should take precedence at a particular point.

The politics of self are complex and require ample self consciousness to negotiate. My experiences in academia have taught me that perhaps there is no "coherent" self that can be articulated. There may only be fractures, the likes of which drive us to discover more about ourselves. "To be or not to be" may not be a question of choosing between just two options but rather the freedom to construct and reconfigure multiple selves as our experiences change. The trick is to know the difference.

Notes

¹ For more information please see Wilson (2011).

² USCIS stands for United States Citizenship and Immigration Services.

References

- Biccup, A. (2002). Interrupting the discourse of development: On a collision course with postcolonial theory. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 43(1), 33-50.
- Collins, P. H. (2002). Some group matters: Intersectionality, situated standpoints, and Black feminist thought. In T. Lott & J. Pittman (Eds.), *A companion to African-American philosophy* (pp. 205-229). Boston, MA: Blackwell.
- Gordon, N. (2011). Watching my b/lack: The not so colorblind world of academia. In M. Niles & N. Gordon (Eds.), *Still searching for our mothers' gardens: Experiences of new, tenure-track women of color at 'majority' institutions* (pp. 41-62). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Grossberg, L., Wartella, E., & Whitney, C. (1998). *Media making: Mass media in popular culture*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage.
- Guy-Sheftall, B., & Cooper, A. (1997). Teaching diversity at a historically Black college. *Diversity Digest*. Retrieved from <http://www.diversityweb.org/digest/w97/HBCU.html>
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Patton, T. O. (2004). Reflections of a Black woman professor: Racism and sexism in academia. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 15, 185-200.

- Van Camp, D., Barden, J., Sloan, L. R., & Clarke, R. P. (2009). Choosing an HBCU: An opportunity to pursue racial self-development. *Journal of Negro Education*, 78(4), 457-268.
- Wilson, E. (2011). Strangers in the ivory tower: Framing international female faculty identity negotiations in a 'majority' academic institution. In M. Niles & N. Gordon (Eds.), *Still searching for our mothers' gardens: Experiences of new, tenure-track women of color at 'majority' institutions* (pp. 153-174). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Copyright of Women & Language is the property of Organization for the Study of Communication, Language & Gender and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.