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INVENTING THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN

Kamau Bamidele

The so-called “African-American” never arrives in Amerika as a person, but is manufactured within the borders of the Amerikan settler-state as a political entity. The “African-American” is conceptualized only through the vehicles of genocide, theft, and enslavement imposed on us as a byproduct of Euro-American capitalist hegemony. “African-American” is oxymoronic and alienates Afrikans from our sovereign past. Thus, African-Americans are not, and can never be, a people with their own sovereignty. When the ships docked, it was Afrikans (of various ethnicities) who emerged from the hold as slaves, Afrikans who labored in the fields, and Afrikans who fought an ongoing 500-year struggle for liberation, not Amerikans. When described by the land we are indigenous to, as opposed to the land of our captivity, the narrative of our existence here (and the understanding of our status) changes. The decision, then, to consider us “African-Americans” has been an intentional one. When examining the chronology of the phrase “African-American,” we find a term that did not come into popular usage nationally until the late 20th century, as most Afrikans were called “Afrikans,” or “Negroes” upon their arrival in Amerika. By tracking the origins of the term “African-American” from its first known usage, we gain a clearer image of how the African-American is conceptualized in the Amerikan socio-political imagination. Specifically, we can come to grasp how there were political ramifications and benefits for the ruling class in extending faux Amerikan nationalism and identity to the enslaved Afrikan, and retracting the claim to said identity whenever it was beneficial.

The earliest known place where the term “African-American” appears is in an 18th century pamphlet, authored by someone

who identifies as an African-American. Written in Philadelphia in 1782, “A Sermon on the Capture of Lord Cornwallis” begins with an address to the then lieutenant governor of South Carolina, Christopher Gadsden.¹ In this dedication, the author describes themselves as “not having the benefit of a liberal education,” and that they “[have] been an eye witness of [Gadsden’s] indefatigable industry in [his] country’s cause.” Concluding, the author proclaims “that the ruler of the universe may crown with success the cause of freedom, and speedily relieve your bleeding country, is the hearty wish of an African American.”²

From this document, we can see the historical conditions under which the African-American emerges, and two claims can be made with some confidence: First, it is highly unlikely (and there is indeed no evidence to suggest it) that the author of the document introduced “African-American” into the lexicon of late 18th-century Amerika. Though this is the earliest documented usage of the term, it is more plausible that it was already in some degree of circulation among certain groups and localities, rather than invented in this text. This suggests that the “African-American” was, at the very least, occupying space in the Amerikan imagination during the late years of the Amerikan Revolution. The second thing we can ascertain from this document is that the “African-American” was a politicized entity from the outset, and that there is no divorcing of that entity from Amerikan nationalism, and even patriotism. This is best seen in the author’s last statement to Gadsden, about the “hearty wish of an African American” being an independent Amerika relieved from war.³ The author here does not express any hopes that they or their people (Afrikans) might be relieved from captivity, but

rather that Amerika as a nation would be liberated. Though it is indeed a sample size of only one, it is highly improbable that these ideas generated individually and were entirely self-contained, especially when one considers that ideas must be synthesized dialectically, which is to say, through the confrontation between contradicting ideas.

The lack of any earlier documentation that identifies Afrikans in Amerika as both “African” and “American” leads us to conclude that the emergence of the “African-American” coincided not simply with the emergence of Amerika, but Amerika as a nation-state. The implications of this dual emergence are obviously manifold; however, contrary to the more wildly propagated present-day narrative—that Afrikans were the first true “patriots” because of their presence in the war-torn landscape of the Revolutionary war—the vast masses of Afrikans were either enslaved and forced to go to war by their masters, or compelled to struggle for whichever force of the conflict that might emancipate them, a fact known and feared by Amerika’s bourgeois rulers.

This is evident from the documentation of the time. In the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson articulated the concerns of many regarding the desertion of Afrikans to the British cause, writing, “[King George III] is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them.”⁴ Generally speaking, there was an aversion to arming Afrikans by the Amerikans (and indeed the English), who foresaw the possibility of insurrection, as prior to November of 1775, all Afrikans who had not initially joined the conflict at its opening were barred from serving in the Continental Army. However, following the issuing of Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation that month, which promised freedom to any enslaved Afrikans who joined the British Army, there was an immediate turn in the attitudes of many

regarding Afrikan participation in the war.⁵ In fact, the following month George Washington wrote to John Hancock, “it has been represented to me that the free negroes who have served in this Army, are very much [dissatisfied] at being discarded—as it is to be apprehended, that they may seek employ in the ministerial Army—I have presumed to depart from the resolution respecting them, & have given [license] for their being enlisted, if this is disapproved of by Congress, I will put a stop to it.”⁶ By 1778, Congress had knocked down the existing barriers stopping Afrikans from enlisting, and individual states and townships had begun to appeal directly to enslaved Afrikans by offering them emancipation. Subsequently, many Afrikans joined the Continental Army; though, notably, most were relegated to service positions and were never armed.⁷

We see here that the decision to recruit Afrikans as members of the Continental Army, was motivated by fear of Afrikan desertion to the British. As a means of enticing Afrikans into service, they were offered an opportunity to integrate the Amerikan settler-state as Amerikans. More than an actual law or statement that explicitly declared Afrikans as Amerikans however (which we wouldn’t see until the 14th Amendment), at this particular moment, being an “Amerikan” was embodied principally by the promises of “liberty” through emancipation, and entrance into capitalist property relations as landowners through the promise of land grants offered by various states during the war.⁸ This is particularly relevant in the case of free Afrikans, who would not have needed emancipation, and thus would’ve required other motivation to participate in this war. Thus, as early Amerikan nationalism, rooted in bourgeois concepts of “liberty” and “independence” that were tied to land ownership, was ostensibly expanded to include the material wants of Afrikans, many Afrikans who had not joined the British (or had remained out of the conflict entirely) became patriots. In this way, we see how nationalism



1903 political cartoon depicting a statue of Abraham Lincoln standing over emancipated Africans, while Theodore Roosevelt stands before it, gripping the 15th amendment in his left hand and placing his right hand on the shoulder of an African man. Library of Congress.

that would repeat with the frequency of America's involvement in wars or in times of great international and national tension. During the American Civil War for example, the aim of the Union (and its leader Abraham Lincoln) was to crush the Southern rebellion and secure the stability of the Union as one entity. Though perceived by revisionist historians to, from the outset, be a war against slavery, the conflict was, as Lincoln articulated in his preliminary proclamation of emancipation, "[to] be prosecuted for the object of practically restoring the constitutional relation between the United States, and each of the States, and the people thereof, in which States that relation is, or may be, suspended or disturbed."⁹ The only reason federal power was used to emancipate any slaves at all (though, critically, these were only slaves in the Confederate states) was to make Africans eligible to enlist in the Union army, which by that point had lost much of its strength, as the Union did not have enslaved Africans to rely on as a productive force while sending soldiers to combat the Confederacy (something the Confederacy had, by contrast).¹⁰ Again, in this example, though "American" does not appear in either transcript of the Emancipation Proclamation, the concept of "liberty"—and, principally, the opportunity to struggle for liberty—were seen at the core of being American. This is evident particularly from some African perspectives of the conflict, related in statements such as, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S; let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder, and bullets in his pocket, and there is no power on earth or under the earth which can deny that he has earned the right of citizenship in the United States," that were made, in this case by Frederick Douglass in a speech referenced by W.E.B. DuBois in *Black Reconstruction*.¹¹ Looking even further ahead, we see how after the "permanent" ratification of Africans as "Americans" by the 14th Amendment, the threat of revocation of that status (accompanied by the consequences

functions as a tool for organization, only being necessary in the context of a state or people that (whether legitimately or not) are seeking to consolidate power. For America's bourgeoisie, there would have only been a net positive benefit to extend the American identity to a people who had already demonstrated the capacity to flock to the lines of the enemy.

In reality, though, this moment of fraternity in American nationhood was brief, as the claim of Africans to Americanness was never meaningfully substantiated by either the total abolition of slavery or the guarantee of full participation in white liberal democracy. This is an episode

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that would follow being deemed "un-American") was used to intimidate Afrikans into compliance with the will of the bourgeoisie. There is perhaps no greater example of this than the persecution of Paul Robeson by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) for his claim that Afrikans in the United States could not be made to go to war against the Soviet Union on the behalf of Amerikan imperialists.¹² In this case, after attempting to intimidate Robeson directly into condemning communism and failing, the committee sought out other Afrikans to denounce Robeson and reaffirm the commitment of the entire race to Amerika; the most famous among them being Jackie Robinson. As a means of protecting his attempt to integrate Major League Baseball, in 1949 Jackie Robinson capitulated to the desires of HUAC and testified against Robeson, stating that he did not believe Robeson could speak for all or even the majority of Afrikans in Amerika, as he and many other "Americans" cherished Amerika, and would not relinquish the freedoms offered to them by turning against their country.¹³ The entire debacle reveals that, much like with emancipation in the Civil War era and the revolutionary era that preceded it, integrationism in this period was the objective. Many thought that integration would both legally and practically secure Afrikans as Amerikans, and the desire of many Afrikans to fully assimilate to the Amerikan identity was given functionality by the ruling class (in this case to quell any sympathies Afrikans nationally

had for communism and the USSR).

Clearly, the marriage of the Amerikan identity to Afrikans through the conception of the "African-American" had a multitude of purposes: for the rulers of Amerika, it meant Afrikans could be recruited into the various wars and national projects through nationalistic rhetoric; for Afrikans, the acceptance of the "African-American" was born from a desire to enter into and remain within white liberal democracy. This all, however, examines the purely political ramifications of the imposition of the Amerikan identity for Afrikans and the ruling class, and we must also address the psychological impact it had for Afrikans specifically. In the 19th century, there was a vested interest by many Afrikans to strive towards the eradication of the various ideological and cultural aspects of their Africanity as a means of assimilation. In the article, "Struggling with the Past: Some Views of African-American Identity," Brian W. Thomas addresses this phenomena. He writes, "During the early to middle nineteenth century, a time when recognizable expressions of African culture flourished in various parts of the United States, some influential black leaders shunned descriptive labels that contained 'Africa.'"¹⁴ The "some" described here is not limited to lesser known leaders either, as even Frederick Douglass "argued for the 'American-ness' of [his] people, a stance that prioritized economic and political goals over African identity."¹⁵ Though



A photo of Paul Robeson, an actor, singer, athlete, and socialist who was investigated by the House on Un-American Activities during the early 1950s before being called to a hearing to ascertain whether he was a communist in 1956. Wikimedia Commons

there were instances of nationalist organizations and certain religious sects, like the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) who stressed being Afrikan, by the 1830s many Afrikans had come to distance themselves from “Afrikan” as an identity in reaction to the emergent Afrikan colonization movement.¹⁶

Clearly, the process by which the Afrikan becomes “Amerikan” incorporates more than simply bourgeois politics, but promotes a unique alienation of the Afrikan from their history all on its own. In understanding why Afrikans appeared to embrace this during the 19th century, we must also consider that the typical processes by which Afrikans might assimilate were largely ineffective or unavailable. As it is described in *Freedom on My Mind* by Deborah Gray White, Mia Bay, and Waldo Martin, during the years prior to

the ratification of the 13th amendment, the means by which Afrikans might be emancipated were, “assimilation into an owner’s kinship network by marriage and manumission – a legal process that slave owners could initiate to grant freedom to a favored slave.”¹⁷ Both of these methods however, were obviously rare and occurred on a more individual basis that did not make them viable for collective emancipation. With the above context, when thinking back towards the historical conditions under which a document such as “A Sermon on the Capture of Lord Cornwallis” emerged, the sort of nationalistic rhetoric featured in the document and the psychology of the (presumably) Afrikan author becomes even more clear.

It serves here, having fleshed out a few of the various causes and effects that accompanied the emergence of the “African-American”, to reiterate that this was not an identity that had any real collective presence in the Amerikan imagination until the mid-20th century. In a way that is not indistinct from the settler population of Amerika only propagating the “history” and “culture” of Amerika during conflict with other nations (or even during internal conflicts such as the Civil War), so too were Afrikans considered anything but Amerikan at all points outside of when it suited ruling class interests. Citizenship was, time after time, denied to Afrikans. Rebecca Kook, situating the first emergence of the “African-American” identity in the collective Amerikan imagination, speaks to such things in her article, “The Shifting Status of African Americans in the American Collective Identity.”¹⁸ Taking the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments as a starting point, Kook writes, “By establishing equal citizenship, the [13th, 14th, and 15th] amendments allowed Americans to think of their civic nation as inclusive. Their quick reversal, however, exemplified by the establishment of the Jim Crow system in the South, and the maintenance of severe informal discrimination in the North, in effect rendered this

short lived.”¹⁹ Furthermore, nearly two centuries after the initial appearance of “African-American” in the pamphlet,²⁰ Kook states, “as late as the 1950s, African Americans were portrayed [in history textbooks] as part of American history only in their capacity as slaves.”²¹

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We observe here the conditionality on which the “African-American” exists. The African-American can win Amerikan wars. The African-American can be the critical voting bloc for a major political party. The African-American can be a patriot, and have nationalistic pride. This all, however, requires the

extinction (physically, culturally, and psychologically) of the Afrikan, and is achieved only on the condition that we submit unconditionally to the will of Amerika’s oligarchical rulers. In the end, we are never granted true compensation for the sacrifices we make, as our status as “Amerikan” is perpetually extended and revoked according to bourgeois needs. Thus, the “African-American” was a political invention. The idea that a people stolen from Afrika, enslaved in Amerika, and subsequently excluded from virtually all aspects of Amerikan citizenship could be “American” is an inherent contradiction propagated by the ruling class as a means of curtailing Afrikan enmity for empire, and securing Afrikan support for Amerikan nationalistic endeavors. When Afrikans reckon with our own captive status and indigeneity, we cease to be the wretched children, the “second-class citizens” of the Amerikan settler-state, constantly seeking admittance to the shining city on the hill, and instead become displaced Afrikans. We cease to be the tortured builders of this land, martyred for its creation, and instead become the survivors of protracted genocide. Most importantly, we cease to ask for power, scrambling for whatever scraps of influence or autonomy are granted to us by the capitalist state apparatus, and instead become a people whose sole task (if we hope to survive) is to build the power necessary to topple said state, liberate our ancestral home, and liberate ourselves by doing so.

ENDNOTES

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