

**Afro-Anglo: America's Core Culture
A Consolidation of Peoples in the United States**

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Abstract

There exists a Core Culture in America which is shared by all people inasmuch as they are Americans. This Core Culture is a consolidation of Anglo-American and Afro-American culture. While many authors view the black experience as distinct and separate from the core American experience, this paper argues that American Core Culture is uniquely defined by its Afro-Anglo nature--a blend of both the Afro and the Anglo culture, history, and experience. That Afro-Anglo culture has not been recognized as America's Core Culture is due both to the Eurocentrism of the dominant paradigm of American culture, and the Afrocentrist competing paradigm of a separate black American culture. Afro-Anglo Core Culture recognizes the oneness of whites and blacks together as part of the American experience.

Introduction*

Most members of society share a set of general values and beliefs (Hess 1993). Indeed, sharing a Core Culture is typically a necessary condition of a coherent society. To be sure, even a Core Culture may have inconsistencies, contradictions, subcultures, and reflect varying fashions of the time. But underpinning each coherent society is a, more or less, constant Core Culture whose vitality is a strong marker of consolidation.

The thesis presented here is that America has such a Core Culture, albeit a Core Culture that has not generally been recognized as such. This Core Culture is Afro-Anglo culture. This culture

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extends from the very initial decades of American society and continues into the present. That Afro-Anglo culture has not been recognized as America's Core Culture is due both to the Eurocentrism of the dominant paradigm of American culture and the Afrocentrist competing paradigm of a separate black American culture.

The plan of this paper is straightforward. First, I will selectively examine different views of an American common culture. I will stress the similarities of these beliefs as evidence of the existence of an American Core Culture. Second, I address the conventional beliefs of those who see American Core Culture as the creation of a white ruling class. Finally, I propose that American Core Culture is a combination of Anglo-American and Afro-American culture. This common Afro-Anglo culture, though not recognized as such, has served as an instrument of social consolidation for close to three centuries.

Core Culture in America

My premise is that despite the heterogeneous nature of American society, a Core Culture of values and beliefs serves as a common framework for our society. Core Culture is nicely summarized by John McElroy's (1989) definition of culture:

[Culture is] something that persists from generation to generation in a people's history; something that is more pervasive than economics, religion, or politics; something that informs all of these areas of human activity and thought and that provides a people their continuous sense of identity and right behavior and belief.

American Core Culture in particular is less dependent on other social ties (e.g. racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) than that of most other societies. But even when certain aspects of American life apply to a specific class, race, or region, these specific cultures are greatly influenced by America's Core Culture. Indeed, this Core Culture defines what it means to be an American. Glazer and Moynihan

(1974) thus talk about Italian-Americans, "As the old [country] culture fell away—and it did rapidly enough—a new one, shaped by the distinctive experience of life in America, was formed and a new [Italian-American] identity was created." America might be a country filled with differences, but it is not these differences which form our Core Culture. The culture that remains after the loss of ties to an immigrant background is our Core Culture.

Benidict Anderson (1992) observes that *assumptions* of common beliefs and shared backgrounds provide the basis for all communities. All communities larger than a village (that is to say, any community where every member does not know each other member) are "imagined communities" (Anderson). Any people who share a common language, religion, homeland, or set of beliefs imagine themselves as part of a community because of a perceived common culture.

While some sociologists, notably Robin Williams (1970), have attempted to itemize the elements of America's Core Culture, I will not do so here.¹ Rather, I hold that the Core Culture is defined and exemplified through such aspects of our life as music, religion, rhetoric, arts, education, work, and so on. To list the specifics of America's culture is to miss the basic point that America's Core Culture is uniquely Afro-Anglo in origin and content.

To hold that America's Core Culture is fundamentally Afro-Anglo implies that recent immigrants (and others striving to be American), in order to join the mainstream, must, in some sense, become Afro-Anglo in their adopted culture. While it has been customary to think of such immigrants becoming Anglo-European, I do not believe that the argument has ever been phrased in Afro-Anglo terms. Without the concept of Afro-Anglo Core Culture, the United States can only be viewed as constantly at odds with itself.

¹Robin Williams, Jr., offers one list of fifteen dominant values in American society. 1) Achievement and success, 2) Activity and work, 3) Moral orientation, 4) humanitarian motives, 5) Efficiency and practicality, 6) Process and progress, 7) material comfort, 8) Equality, 9) Freedom, 10) External conformity, 11) Science and rationality, 12) Nationalism, 13) Democracy, 14) Individualism, and 15) Racism and group-superiority themes.

By adopting an Afro-Anglo framework, we see processes of consolidation working.

The Conventional Wisdom: Afro-American Culture as a Sub-Culture

Many authors believe the Core Culture to be the exclusive domain of the white, Anglo-Saxon ruling class. Sub-cultures, including the culture of African-Americans, are formed in opposition to the ruling class. A stream of literature presents the case 1) for a separate black culture--both positive and negative, and 2) that the mainstream culture, being purely "white," is incompatible with being black. Ongoing interpretation of black American culture as essentially (or at least derivatively) African also contributes to the conventional wisdom, albeit from a different starting point (Stuckey 1987).

One academic trend uses the existence of the black underclass ghetto as an indicator of a separate black opposition culture. William Wilson (1987), emphasizes economics and segregation, or in his words, the "concentration effects." The concentration of poor creates a social isolation which differentiates the ghetto subculture from mainstream society (Wilson). Massey and Denton (1993) blame residential segregation for a separate culture in opposition to mainstream white society. This sub-culture continues to grow: "A segment of the urban black population has evolved a set of behaviors, attitudes, and values that are increasingly at variance with those held in the wider society" (Massey and Denton). Gibson and Ogbu (1991) argue that the immigration experience, whether voluntary or involuntary, determines whether a group incorporates or rejects mainstream culture. Thus blacks, as involuntary immigrants, have formed a culture in opposition to the host culture (Gibson and Ogbu). McElroy (1989), who earlier provided a definition of culture, claims that "Black Americans have individually and collectively been making [a] psychological immigration to America since before the American Revolution." Jaynes and Williams (1989), while not talking about culture directly, agree that

there are significant differences in attitudes between whites and blacks.

Also common is the belief in the pure "whiteness" of mainstream culture and its incompatibility with being black. Carmichael and Hamilton (1992) mock the notion of "integrating the Negro into the mainstream institutions of the society from which he has been traditionally excluded." They assume a distinct separation between the "Negro" and the cultures of "the mainstream." According to Carmichael and Hamilton, a black cannot integrate and remain black: "'Integration' also means that black people must give up their identity, deny their heritage. . . Integration, as traditionally articulated, would abolish the black community." Michael Dyson (1993) observes that:

Perhaps the greatest lesson from 'The Cosby Show' is that being concerned about issues that transcend race and therefore display our humanity is fine, but that does not mean we should buy into a vacuous, bland universality that stigmatizes diversity, punishes difference, and destroys dissimilarities. As we painfully learned in the past, we cannot be thrown into the pot and melted down into one phenomenon called The American Experience.

Despite different emphases and political leanings, all these interpretations ultimately view the black experience as being of a separate entity from the core American experience. The belief in the separateness between blacks and Americans is the paradigm that this paper argues against.

I believe that the theory of an Afro-based subculture as opposition to a dominant white culture is popular for three reasons: 1) whites do not want to share "their" Core Culture with blacks, viewing the dominant culture as the exclusive domain of whites; 2) blacks do not like the concept of a common Afro-Anglo culture because it undermines emphasis on a separate black identity; and 3) many social analysts, wanting to explain society in class terms, consider culture only as a dependent variable. Whatever the reasons, all these arguments ignore the crucial Afro core of our Afro-Anglo Core Culture.

Afro-Anglo Core Culture and American Consolidation

The idea that African-American culture is exclusively a thing apart, separate from the whole, having no influence on the shape and shaping of American culture, is a racist fiction. (Gates, 1992)

To view white and black America as two separate worlds is to misread American culture. This is not to deny that separate subcultures exist in America, and that some of these are based on race/ethnicity. But many of these are pre-colonial, e.g. Native American Indians, native Hawaiians, Inuits, and Hispanic settlements predating the Mexican War. But, and this is the overriding point: no part of the Core Culture is not part black. Core Culture in America—that which defines what we think and how we act inasmuch as we are American—is a single Afro-Anglo culture.

My selective review of the literature seeks to pull out from diverse sources the commonalities of the Afro-Anglo culture in American Core Culture. The black experience, starting with the original sin of slavery, is an indelible part of the American experience. In fact, slavery quickly became a uniquely American institution, one that distinguished the English colonies from England (Kolchin 1993). In effect, in the eighteenth century, slavery was America.

Because of slavery, African culture—religion, language, ethnicity, even families—was partly stripped from blacks in America. The result was a people with no frame of reference backwards to the “old country.” Despite other disparaging attitudes, no one could realistically claim that blacks in America were not American. Ogbu's Voluntary/Involuntary Minority dichotomy is not incompatible with the concept of Core Culture. This is diagrammed in Table 1.

Table 1: Core Culture and Voluntary/Involuntary Minorities

	Voluntary	Involuntary
Core Culture	Anglos	Black Americans
Peripheral Culture	Post-Civil War Immigrants	Indians, Inuits, Hawaiians, Native Hispanics

Despite the involuntary nature of the black arrival in America, Afro-Americans have greatly shaped our Core Culture. As Patterson and Winship (1992) observed: “Indeed, not since ancient Rome conquered and then surrendered to the culture of its Greek slaves and freedmen has the culture of a dominant world civilization been so enormously influenced by so small a minority of people.”

This idea of blacks being woven into the American Core Culture is supported by Cornell West (1993). West observes that both liberals and conservatives view blacks as a “problem people.” Liberals want black people “included” or “integrated” into “our” society, while conservatives want blacks to be “well behaved” and “worthy of acceptance” (West). Both fail to see that black people are “neither addition nor defections from American life, but rather *constitutive elements of that life*” (West).

Ishmael Reed (1993) agrees that “there is no such thing as Black America or White America, two nations, two separate bloodlines. America is a land of distant cousins.” While Reed does not directly address the concept of Afro-Anglo Core Culture, many of his themes support the idea. Reed observes the danger inherent in “an exploration of the African American past [because it is] an exploration that would reduce the newspaper, bureaucrat, and think-tank idea of a Black America, a place inhabited with people of an uninterrupted African genealogy, to speciousness.” Blacks are Americans, whether or not blacks want to admit it; and America is black, whether or not whites want to admit it.

Writers and critics such as Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison have suggested there is a black presence not just in black literature, but in all American literature—even in novels which are largely, and falsely, seen as white (DePalma 1992). It should come as no

surprise when the epitome of an American boy, Huckleberry Finn, is found to be black through his speech patterns. Finn's speech patterns can be found in southern speech generally, but "the line of influence ran from black to white--deriving ultimately from West African systems of grammar--rather than the other way round" (Fishkin).

Ralph Ellison (1972) argues that though much music has origins in experiences which are specific to blacks, "they expressed and gave significance to feelings and sounds so characteristically American that both spirituals and jazz have been absorbed into the musical language of the culture as a whole." The consolidatory nature of Core Culture creates a country in which "the values of my own [Negro] people are neither 'white' nor 'black,' they are American. Nor can I see how they could be anything else, since we are a people who are involved in the texture of the American experience" (Ellison). Likewise, Elvis Presley, the super star of popular American culture is also the white person who epitomizes black influence.

I believe the Afro influence on Afro-Anglo Core Culture is present in such other "American" items as Protestant individualism; the moralistic strain in American foreign policy; humor, as can be seen in exaggerated word play, self put-downs, and humor in the face of adversity; the love of the underdog (e.g. Brer Rabbit); and even the conflict between the religious right and secular humanism.

It is arguable whether or not all things 'black' are part of the American Core Culture. Rap, for example, occupies a marginal, though identifiable position, in the American cultural landscape. Though accepted by large segments of white society, rap remains a "black thing." Jazz and blues, however, have become part of our Core Culture. To argue that jazz and blues are no longer black simply because they are not exclusively black is ludicrous. Something does not lose its Afro-roots just because it is accepted by the larger, mostly white society.

The perspective of Afro-Anglo Core Culture obviates the issue of blacks assimilating, or worse, "selling out" to white society. As much as white society must recognize the Afro-roots of the core Afro-Anglo culture, blacks must not disown their heritage when an

item shifts from "purely" Afro to Afro-Anglo. Rather, all groups should take pleasure in the recognition of the African aspects in our common Afro-Anglo culture. Negative black images should not be glorified simply because they are black when there are so many positive black themes throughout Afro-Anglo Core Culture.

The de facto recognition of the black element in Afro-Anglo Core Culture can be seen, among other ways, in attempts from other "oppressed" groups to compare their plight to the that of the black experience. By attaching themselves to blacks, other groups are trying to legitimize themselves by showing that they too are part of the Core Culture. By being part of the Core Culture, a group is given both certain benefits—recognition and legal protection as a group—and responsibilities—the expectation to act in accordance with American cultural, religious, and social beliefs. Why do many blacks consider it an insult for other "minority groups" such as recent immigrants and gays to compare their plight to that of the black American experience? Because blacks, in terms of Core Culture, are on the *inside looking out*.

Afro-Anglo Culture, however, is not about exclusion; it is about consolidation. Afro-Anglo Core Culture supports a cultural, as opposed to class, view of the world. The Core Culture reflects a belief in the gradual but inevitable consolidation of different peoples. This Afro-Anglo consolidation has been occurring since before the Revolutionary War, and our Core Culture has been de facto in our country for over a century.

Afro-Anglo Core Culture implies that we, as a society, have a responsibility to blacks which we do not have towards other groups. While it is perfectly all right for a group of people to wear a sari, eat dog meat, or speak Spanish (we do, however, draw the line at polygamy), for better or worse, you will not be accepted as American in the cultural sense until you adapt to our Afro-Anglo Core Culture. Other groups are welcome to join the Core Culture, and most strive to do just that. And as immigrants assimilate, join our Core Culture, and become Americans, they become part black--just as are all Americans.

Summary and Conclusions

There are two general stages in Afro-Anglo Core Culture: 1) beginning with slavery, American culture is defined by the consolidation of Afro and Anglo culture; and 2) new groups consolidate towards the Afro-Anglo core. Afro-Anglo Core Culture recognizes the oneness of whites and blacks together as part of the American experience. Though many whites and blacks believe in the cultural separateness of two races, all too often minor differences are studied at the expense of the greater inclusive trend: a consolidation in the United States of different peoples through a common Afro-Anglo Core Culture.

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