# What Kind of Black Are We?

By Afi-Odelia E. Scruggs
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A few weeks ago, I saw part of the Pan Africanist dream come true.

It was during the closing ceremony at an African dance conference. To a man -- and they were all men -- the drummers and teachers came from Africa. To a woman -- and we were all women -- the dancers were African American. Among the spectators sat a Trinidadian; her Senegalese husband and his twin led the class. As we circled, I realized that Africa's children had been reunited.

Then the circle broke, and the class ended. As we drifted away, I wondered: "What kind of black are we now?"

That used to be an easy question for Americans to answer.

African American identity was built on two criteria: African ancestry and an ancestral connection to chattel slavery. We looked at skin color, hair texture, and the size of noses and lips to determine whether a person met the first criterion. The second was assumed: If you were black in this country, somebody in your family had been enslaved.

In the past 30 years, however, 1 million people have come from Africa to the United States -- more than were brought during the transatlantic slave trade. According to the most recent census figures, 1.5 million blacks claim Caribbean ancestry. In fact, scholars say, the United States is the only place in the world where all of Africa's children -- native-born Africans, Afro Caribbeans, Afro Hispanics, Afro Europeans and African Americans -- are represented.

This development hasn't received much attention in a national debate that has made "Hispanic" synonymous with "immigrant." But the change has profound implications for the country's 35 million blacks. It sometimes leads to interracial tensions, which were on display during last week's CNN-YouTube Democratic presidential debate. A black college student asked Sen. Barack Obama -- whose mother is a white Kansan and whose father is Kenyan -- whether he is "authentically black enough."

The student's question speaks to the larger issue of how to define blackness at a time when our gains in the United States are fragile. We are suspicious of interlopers reaping the fruits of a long history of labors in this country. But now we have to talk about new ways to be black. We have to talk about standards other than ancestry and slavery.

The 2000 Census provides a dramatic reason why. Although the majority of African Americans were born in the United States, nearly 25 percent of growth in the black population between 1990 and 2000 was due to immigration, according to John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University who studies black immigration. "The black population is quite suspicious about immigration and what it means to their position in society, and that extends to Africans and Afro Caribbeans," he said.

Immigrants and native-born Americans of all races need to recognize that the old criteria don't fit the new reality.

"You can be 'African American' because of the enslavement experience," said Tina Richardson, a Lehigh University psychologist who studies racial identity. "You can be an 'African in America,' where you're grounded in an African experience other than the African American experience."

One of the most compelling reconsiderations of the black experience -- and by extension, black identity -- comes from the curators of "In Motion: The African American Migration Experience" ( http://www.inmotionaame.org/index.cfm?bhcp=1).

This online exhibit, produced by New York's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, frames African American history in terms of 13 migrations. Only two were involuntary: the transatlantic slave trade, which brought the bulk of Africans to the New World, and the United States' domestic slave trade, which distributed slaves from the original colonies throughout the Southern and Western sections of the country. (Among the others are Caribbean immigration, the great migration north after World War II, and Western and Southern migration within the United States.)

What kind of black are we now? The scholars behind "In Motion" clearly want ethnicity and diversity -- and not just color -- to be part of that answer. "The new interpretation of African-American history that we present here also puts the Caribbean, Haitian, and contemporary African immigrations into the unfolding of the African-American migration experience," they write. The exhibit "underscores and explains the extraordinary diversity of African Americans living in the United States today."

This is a novel view of what is commonly referred to as ethnicity in this country. The waves of European immigration in the early 1900s meant that, for most of the 20th century, ethnicity was the provenance of whites.

That began to change when the growth of the Hispanic population forced Americans to differentiate among Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans and Dominicans. But Hispanics with African ancestry were Hispanic first and foremost.

African and Caribbean immigrants often talk about being Yoruba or Mande, about being from Barbados or from Trinidad. Because of slavery, many native-born blacks don't know their specific ethnic heritage and thus remain defined primarily by race. For now,

we are African Americans, with more emphasis on the latter part of that identity than we might care to acknowledge.

"We do like the benefit, assets of being American, but many of us have a desire to connect with things that are African," said Richardson, the psychologist. But she notes that visiting Africa or being around Africans can show native-born blacks how American we really are.

I saw this for myself during a recent visit to Harlem. I created a grand walking tour: the Studio Museum; Sylvia's Restaurant; the Schomburg Center; Muhammad Mosque No. 7, where Malcolm X once preached. I strolled the streets of the unofficial capital of Black America.

Then I took a spontaneous detour and found myself in "Little Senegal," a three-block replica of the commercial districts I'd seen when I visited Dakar. Instead of stores offering urban gear, the street was lined with shops selling the elaborately decorated robes that the Senegalese call boubous. Instead of restaurants selling greens, sweet potatoes and macaroni and cheese, I found diners selling stewed lamb and rice. In less than 15 minutes, I'd traversed two concentric worlds.

These days, though, I don't have to go to Harlem to see the global currents that are converging in America's black communities. I can drive four hours from my Cleveland home, south to Cincinnati to the Darou Salaam supermarket. Or I can travel two hours to Columbus, where the average taxi driver is most likely Somali. That's because Ohio's capital city -- in the heart of the heartland -- is also home to the country's second-largest Somali community.

Or I can simply walk around the corner, where a neighborhood beauty shop advertises "African Braiding!" and the "Taste of Jamaica" carry-out promises to open soon.

What kind of black are we now? That depends on where you look and whom you see.

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