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Acting Black: College, Identity, And The Performance Of Race

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INTRODUCTION

[T]he project of history is . . . to understand [the] production [of identity] as an ongoing process of differentiation, relentless in its repetition, but also . . . subject to redefinition, resistance and change.

—Joan Scott, “Multiculturalism
and the Politics of Identity”

This book is one take on college and race. It is based on interviews with fifty-five college-educated African Americans in the Chicago area during 1990 and 1991. The people I interviewed were undergraduate students between 1967 and 1989 at either historically black Howard University in Washington, D.C., or predominantly white Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.¹ Desiring to understand my own experience at a predominantly white college with one semester spent at a historically black one, I decided to speak with African-American alumni and alumnae of two institutions of higher education, comparable (as I show in chapter 4) but for the racial composition of their student bodies. I wondered why some African Americans chose mostly white colleges and others chose historically black ones. I wondered if the racial sense African Americans had of themselves was influenced by the college they attended. I was especially interested in the ways that *formal equality* coexisted with *informal inequality*—that is to say, the contradiction that everyone is equal on paper because discrimination has been made illegal and the reality that most people of color still experience racial discrimination.

With each question I asked, respondents answered twice—first addressing my question and then addressing the salient question of their lives. With the first answer came portraits of college life—from socializing with friends and sense of community to enduring the rigors of academics and, for many, a sense of alienation and isolation. Alumni focused on the trade-offs made to pursue a degree with unequivocal prestige to those made with the hope of enjoying four years undistracted by explicit racism.

With the latter answer came extensive commentary on what it means to be black in the late-twentieth-century United States. The men and women with whom I spoke taught me about college in particular and how it feels to be a college-educated African American more generally. They taught me about the flexibility of race as a social identity, and the ways that all Americans, not just African Americans or other racial minorities, play or inhabit race roles at this moment in history.

In college and graduate school—and now as a college professor—I have seen most people of color in these settings forced to participate in a metaphorical racial trial. We are presumed to be guilty; in this case, guilt is synonymous with not being a “good fit” with the college, unless we prove ourselves otherwise. This phenomenon is not limited to the college campus. At times the trial is explicit, but these days, it is usually implicit. Sometimes the players in this metaphorical race trial refuse to play their roles, other times they have no choice. But the limited roles of prosecutor and defendant, judge and juror remain Durkheimian social facts, coercing even the most stubbornly anti-racist individuals into them as we interpret, ignore, or take a stand on anything having to do with race.

Why, well after the gains of the Civil Rights movement, were black college students still experiencing these racial trials? The answer, I believe, can be found in the powerful history of white supremacy in the United States. The ways in which the ideology of white supremacy persists are often difficult to see. Nonetheless, racism persists, woven into the fabric of the culture with even more subtlety, and, to many, less visibility after the dramatic changes wrought by the Black Freedom Movement.

When I began this project, I felt as if I were the defendant in one of these “Does she or doesn’t she fit?” trials, and I saw conducting interviews with other African Americans as a way to begin gathering evidence. But evidence to prove what? That white colleges are racist? That African Americans are exhausted by racism? That black colleges are the answer? The more evidence I gathered, the more the paradigm of defense and prosecution seemed inadequate to the task of examining race and college. Scholarship, though often adversarial, offered another way of approaching the situation of black students in college. My professors encouraged me to listen carefully, to investigate, to describe, and to examine previous scholarship. The scientific method paid off, and my interviews with black college alumni brought me beyond the quadrangle of the college campus and revealed ways to understand race better.

Institutions of higher education are diverse, as are the students who attend them. My observations apply to many students of color, but students of color, too, are a varied group. They come from groups with different practical and experiential histories and with different relationships to the ideology of white supremacy. So while this book is about college and race, it is not about all racial groups and it is not a large quantitative comparison. It does not include interviews with European Americans,

Asian Americans, Native Americans, multiracial Americans, and Latinos and Latinas, and it does not look at colleges and universities where other racial minority groups are in the majority.

Indeed, “a more complex racial climate is emerging within the historically White colleges and universities in the United States” (Bowman and Smith 2002: 103). This racial climate change is not limited to white campuses, for on historically black campuses, especially at the graduate school level, more white, Asian, and Latino students are also present.

This new racial climate is tempered by three contemporary trends: (1) the growing opposition to civil rights-era policies to provide access and support services for African American college students who still remain underrepresented; (2) the increasing demands for more multiethnic institutional changes from both Latina/o and Asian American students who make up an expanding portion of the college student population; and (3) the changing racial ideologies that college students [bring] from distinct ethnic backgrounds. (Bowman and Smith 2002: 103)

Qualitative scholarship on the specificity of these experiences, in addition to that on African Americans, must be supported and encouraged so that we have more comparative data and can further appreciate the differences and similarities among groups.

In the rest of this chapter I describe the study, the sample, and the methodology I used, and I briefly outline the book.

FROM STUDENT TO RESEARCHER: SAMPLE AND METHOD

My dissertation project proposed an investigation of the experiences of blacks in college between the late 1960s, when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, through the late 1980s, when the toll of mounting resistance to civil rights initiatives was becoming obvious. As late as 1954, over 90 percent of black students were educated at historically black colleges. In contrast, by 1995 these same schools were educating only 20 percent of the African Americans in college as a result of the dramatic changes wrought by the gains of the Civil Rights Movement. I assumed that speaking to alumni from both a predominantly white and a predominantly black college would yield insights I had not even considered about the relationship between race and higher education.

Using the snowball method of sampling,² I sought African-American alumni who had been undergraduates at either Howard University in Washington, D.C., or Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, both of which had large bodies of alumni in the Chicago area where the study was conducted. As midsized urban uni-

versities, Howard and Northwestern are similar in many ways, though the racial composition of each is almost the photographic negative of the other. About 80 percent of the Northwestern student body was European American when I did the study, and about 80 percent of Howard's student body was African American. Their similarities and differences are described at greater length in chapter 4.

I set out in search of Howard and Northwestern alumni with a list of questions about college expectations, student-faculty relations, student social life, economic background, and career aspirations. The conclusions of this study are based on fifty-five interviews with black college alumni—fifteen men and fifteen women who attended Northwestern and fourteen men and eleven women who attended Howard—that I conducted in 1990 and 1991. Two-thirds of the interviews took place in person and the rest over the phone. Respondents had begun college as early as 1967, and everyone had graduated or left school by 1988. Each respondent spent at least two years as an undergraduate at either Howard or Northwestern.³ The interviews were a combination of closed and open-ended questions and they lasted from twenty-five minutes to three hours.⁴

FROM RESEARCHER TO TEACHER: THE DIALOGUE OF INTERPRETATION

As I expected, college alumni told me about friends and roommates, social and academic obstacles, personal triumphs and tragedies, classes, advisors, professors, and parties. They remembered painful experiences of individual and institutional racism,⁵ all narrated against the backdrop of and sometimes intimately connected to the tumultuous events unfolding in the United States.

I soon learned that social research rarely brings us the insights we expect to find. When the formal interview stopped, many of my respondents continued to talk. They described what it meant for them to be black, how they participated in the expansion and contraction of that meaning, how their understanding of what it meant to be black had changed over time, and how they negotiated racially polarized settings. Some alumni gave long answers to the question of why they chose the school they attended, and I began to interpret their soliloquies as racial justifications. Indeed they often told me what they thought their decision conveyed about their commitment to other black people. Others spoke at length, with nuance and poignancy, about their continued struggle to understand race and the implications this aspect of their identity had for their personal and professional lives. Their ideas encouraged me to focus on racism and racial identity as much as on the college experience.

By the time I began to analyze the transcripts of the interviews, I was well beyond my own college experience. I had finished three years of graduate study, one year as a teaching assistant, and two more years teaching my own courses, first at Northwestern University and then at Colby College. At both places, I taught on race and eth-

nicity in the United States. As I prepared for my third year of teaching, the voices from the interview transcripts took on the role of a Greek chorus. They urged me to investigate whether the definitions of race I was encountering in textbooks and scholarship were explaining *their* experiences.

As my role had changed from student to teacher, I was seeing others struggle with issues I had confronted. If I had ever believed that race and racial identity were salient issues only for me or even only for the respondents in my study, these beliefs were refuted during class times and office hours. Not only were the classes I taught on race fully enrolled, the discussions were weighty and charged. The students who came to my office hours documented race as a central issue by their numbers and the substance of their concerns. In addition, the journal entries of those who did not drop by my office revealed little knowledge about the country's racial history and few spaces in which to wrestle with its implications.

As I moved between the interview transcripts, the classroom, and the library, I discovered that many sociologists' definitions of race were accurate, but that most were incomplete. Influenced by the scholarship of postmodernists who were questioning whether individuals exist as unified subjects and whether representation—racial and otherwise—was enough of a political goal (Butler 1991, Young 1990), I began to appreciate arguments about the complexity of identity. In particular, the idea that individual identity is a uniquely modern phenomenon and always in flux was an “Aha!” moment for me.

At the same time, I found it difficult to reconcile this with the seeming coherence and realness of identity for myself, my respondents, and my students. In the transcripts of the interviews, respondents talked with greater clarity and distance than I have heard most people talk about their identities, and for them racial identity held both constraint and liberation. They were unlike those postmodernist scholars who question the relevance of racial representation, since they understood representation in politics, on television, and in textbooks to be a crucial aspect of achieving a positive sense of self as well as a more accurate understanding of the world. They were like the postmodernists, however, in the multiple ways they talked about race. In their memories of college and their present lives, black alumni described the ways they consciously *acted white* in certain settings and *acted black* in others. Although they saw themselves as black, that did not mean they understood blackness as something simple or simplistic. *The people with whom I spoke treated race as sets of behaviors that they could choose to act out*, as expectations they had of themselves and others, as physical difference, and as ethnicity and subculture. Consciously negotiating their identities, even when there was sometimes very little room to do so, the men and women in this study described *performing*.

The observations that I heard during people's interviews were distinct from what I had seen in the sociological literature on race. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue in *Racial Formation in the United States* (1994), theories about race and race re-

lations in twentieth-century America are characterized by three approaches. These approaches focus on ethnicity, class, and nation. The racial theory dominant in each historical period “is shaped by actually existing race relations,” and whatever theory is dominant provides the members of society “with ‘common sense’ about race, and with categories for the identification of individuals and groups in racial terms” (Omi and Winant 1994:11). Omi and Winant criticize these approaches, arguing that race scholars have done everyone a disservice by not pushing the intellectual envelope when it comes to race. Race theories are often as

political and ideological as . . . theoretical. They neglect both the institutional and ideological nature of race in America, and the systemic presence of racial dynamics in [a wide range of] social spheres. . . . Instead they focus attention on racial dynamics as the irrational products of individual pathologies. (Omi and Winant 1994:10)

While scholars have had limitations, they have both reflected and contributed to the difficulty that regular people have had wrapping their minds around race. Throughout this study, I heard individuals conceive of and describe race in the ethnic, economic, and nationalistic terms that Omi and Winant note have characterized twentieth-century American thinking. But I also observed black alumni speaking about race in terms going well beyond these three approaches.

Omi and Winant are correct that much is missing in the sociological literature on race. My respondents’ discussions revealed an acknowledgment that race is relational, situational, and interpersonally dynamic. When understood with these added dimensions, race cannot be defined only as a characteristic of identity that limits and circumscribes life chances, or only as a stigma for nonwhites, or, in the case of whites, only as an “invisible knapsack” that opens doors and provides privilege.⁶ Understood with greater dimensionality, race and racial identity become another site of human agency, a characteristic or fact that individuals can and often do manipulate, despite its extraordinary power to proscribe social life.

Sociologists have long used dramaturgical metaphors to describe human life (Everett C. Hughes and Erving Goffman stand out as two). When it comes to race, however, such metaphors are often absent. Race expert Winant calls for new ways of thinking about race in *Racial Condition*:

we may have to give up our familiar ways of thinking about race once more. If so, there may also be some occasion for delight. For it may be possible to glimpse yet another view of race, in which the concept operates neither as a signifier of comprehensive identity nor of fundamental difference, both of which are patently absurd, but rather as a marker of the infinity of variations we humans hold. (1994:21)

While Winant's work is broad in focus and examines how race has been treated historically and differently between nation-states, this study is narrower in focus and examines how race is understood by and between individuals. That said, what initially seem to be individual perspectives and interactions reveal broader sociological patterns. Winant appreciates the need for examination at the level of the individual when he argues that previous approaches to the study of race offer "an insufficient appreciation of the *performative* aspect of race" (1994: 18, emphasis in the original). His understanding of race as flexible and contingent confirms the argument I make in this volume about its malleability and its performability, and how it is defined by both subject and situation.

Race, like class, has often been treated like sex—biological, inherited, and (until very recently) immutable. To the contrary, race did not just *happen to* the men and women with whom I spoke (even if they happened to be born into racial categories); these people pushed its envelope and denied the expectations that accompanied their racial designations, showing me, among many things, that college was not just about race and race was not just about feeling trapped.

SUMMARY

Just as my own college experience was the springboard for this investigation, so my teaching experience over the last decade at four predominantly white, selective liberal arts institutions has offered a landing ground. I have observed that predominantly white colleges—especially those that are elite—need to examine the ways in which their admissions policies, assumptions held by faculty and administrative staff, and campus cultures retain vestiges of exclusive social clubs and continue to perpetuate institutional racism. As most of these institutions have become more diverse in terms of the race and class backgrounds of their students, they have already begun to change for the better. Though a diverse learning community is sometimes painful and often exhausting, the challenge is never gratuitous and social heterogeneity makes for a more vibrant and genuine intellectual environment.

In contrast, black colleges are crucial sites in which African-American students are assumed to be capable, and all students who attend them can observe governance by faculty and staff that are among the most multiracial in the country. Historically black colleges and universities, too, face the challenge of teaching black students how to build coalitions with those unlike themselves and how to handle majority status responsibly when such a situation arises. They are charged with the complex task—which they do not always accomplish—of teaching their students to be critical of *all* systems of oppression, not just racial ones. Finally, HBCUs are some of the few places in the country, besides neighborhoods, schools, and religious congregations, where people of color are the majority, which can provide a space in which white students can learn the skills of handling minority status.

The ideas presented about race parallel those that are emerging across disciplines with regard to rethinking other primary characteristics associated with identity. My findings buttress those of psychologists Patricia Gurin and Edgar Epps, who argued in the 1970s that blackness is not merely a negative marker but a complex and often positive characteristic around which individuals and groups bolster identity, nurture dignity, induce political action, and mobilize for change (1975: 4). By treating race as acquired, like a skill or a behavior, we can begin to see it as something over which individuals have differing degrees of control and varying options for agency, as an aspect of identity that is at least partly performed, continuous, and contingent. The experiences of blacks in college reveal that each person has differing but definitive degrees of power over their social identities. Their experiences challenge us to think about race and racial identity in new ways for all Americans, regardless of racial identity or level of education achieved.

One way to subvert white supremacy is to reveal the fiction of purity and superiority that whiteness claims. One corollary to this endeavor is to reveal the reality of a place where persons who do not identify as white are successfully, if hazardously, negotiating the environment. That place is the contemporary university. Taking a bit of issue with Fordham and Ogbu's concept of oppositional culture (1986), I argue that the act of going to school, in this case, college, is both conformative *and* oppositional to the dominant culture. For millions of men and women of African descent, going to college is *acting black*. Although my work and my hope is for a transformation of racial designation into a meaning away from social hierarchy and injustice that I cannot yet imagine (Ware and Back 2002), for today, I hope this study contributes to the growing body of evidence that race is contingent, contested, and negotiated even as it protects inequality.

OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the history of higher education for blacks in the United States while alluding to the literature on blacks in predominantly black and predominantly white colleges. Studies germane to the experiences of respondents are fleshed out in chapters 5 and 6.

In chapter 3, I look back over my own experience as a student in college during the 1980s through the lens of race. My college experience provided the original impetus for this study, and my subsequent experience as an educator has provided evidence for the necessity of continuing to wrestle with the importance and challenges of multiculturalism.

Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to the institutions where the men and women I interviewed attended college.

Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the college memories of black Northwestern University and Howard University alumni.

Chapter 7 looks at the ways and reasons that black communities on college campuses are sites of idealization, disappointment, and nostalgia for their participants.

In chapter 8 I allude to some of the ways that race has been treated in the sociological literature and turn to the scholarship of other disciplines as well, in order to theorize the multidimensionality of race.

Chapter 9 returns to the interviews to reveal empirical examples of race as a characteristic that is simultaneously ascribed, symbolically mediated as status or stigma, socially constructed, and consciously manipulated or performed.

In chapter 10, I offer recommendations for colleges and universities based on the observations and experiences of Howard and Northwestern alumni and I review the implications for sociology of treating race as a performed characteristic.⁷

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Every interviewee represented has been given a pseudonym. There may be black alumnae at each institution that have some of the names I've chosen, but that is purely coincidental. I refer to the two institutions attended, however, by their actual names. This is not a study about Howard and Northwestern *per se*, but about student experience at two similar schools with different racial compositions. The experiences that students had at each place are, of course, representative of the time they were there, just as memories of my own college experiences at Haverford and Spelman are limited to the time I was there. Since these four institutions have undergone important changes in recent years, I'd recommend that students interested in attending these schools look to contemporary research.

2. Snowball sampling consists of relying on an informant either to pass the researcher's name on to other potential respondents or to refer the researcher to potential respondents directly. See the appendix for further discussion of my method. All but one respondent graduated from college.

3. The names and some identifying characteristics of all respondents and the names of teachers and administrative staff to whom they refer have been changed to protect their anonymity.

4. See the appendix for an outline of the interview schedules and deeper discussion of interviewing challenges.

5. Sociologists Margaret Andersen and Howard Taylor (1999) offer this definition:

Racism is the perception and treatment of a racial or ethnic group, or member of that group, as intellectually, socially, and culturally inferior to one's own group. . . . Racism is not only in individual overt behavior, but also in society's institutions. Institutional racism is negative treatment and oppression of one racial or ethnic group by society's existing institutions based on the presumed inferiority of the oppressed group. Key to understanding institutional racism is seeing that dominant groups have the economic and political power to subjugate the minority group, even if they do not have the explicit intent of being prejudiced or discriminating against others. Power, or lack thereof, accrues to groups because of their position in social institutions, not just because of individual attitudes or behavior. (288–89)

6. Although I argue that Peggy McIntosh's (1997) metaphor for white privilege is incomplete, it is also tremendously useful.

7. This study does not enter the debate about which kinds of colleges are best for which students. Many kinds of colleges are necessary to meet the educational and social needs of a diverse nation. Nor does the study offer narratives of the lives of the men and women who were interviewed. This is for two reasons. First, the focus of the study was the college experience only, and second, more information would have jeopardized the anonymity of respondents. Some additional information about respondents, such as their parents' level of education and the jobs that they held at the time of the interview, is available in the appendix.