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Neo-African Americans: discourse on blackness

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Neo African-Americans: discourse on blackness

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FILM REVIEW

Neo African-Americans: discourse on blackness

The Neo-African-Americans: Black Immigrant Identities, 2007 [57 min.], directed by Kobina Aidoo, DVD

The geo-political order is changing. Old inequalities persist and new varieties of unfreedom emerge. The racialised structuring of our world which was established during the nineteenth century is evolving ... (Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue*, 2010, p. 4)

Even the old, the elders, who have lived from decade to decade and beyond say life is different in this time 'way strange' that our world today is a world of 'too much' – that this too muchness creates a wilderness of spirit, the everyday anguish that shapes the habits of being for those who are lost, wandering, searching. (bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, p. 1)

Introduction

In a recent film, *The Neo African-Americans* (2007), directed by Kobina Aidoo, black immigrants to the United States are asked whether they see themselves as African-American.¹ Their responses run the gamut: I am a real African-American (from Africa and America with no American slave history); I am more Haitian-American than African-American; the term African-American is invented by the white establishment; I am a staunch internationalist; I am a hybrid; I am a West Indian; I am a person; I am a black woman; I am an Afro-Latino; perhaps I could be African-American, but it is not my first choice; and, yes, I am African-American. In accounting for these responses, one might argue that the problem is one of class or that the term African American homogenizes a diverse population under a single narrative of forced migration to the US. Or, one might suggest that they speak to a tension between the new Black immigrants who are coming from African and the Caribbean and American Americans. In this review, I posit that we confront a spectacular and indeed hollow form of racial politics in the twenty-first century.

Aidoo's film performs three tasks. First, it disrupts the dominant narrative associated with the term African-American. Second, it presents a multitude of thoughtful, emotional, and honest comments of interviewees occupying a variety of subject positions. And third, it organizes these answers into the larger context of race and immigration in the US. The film performs three other tasks for the student of race and identity politics. First, it allows us to explore contemporary American racial hierarchy. Second, it reveals a spectacle of racialized society. Lastly, it illustrates the way in which people who have not internalized this system negotiate it. In short, *The Neo-African-Americans* allows for the possibility of an interruption, which I think requires us to go back to the antiracist humanist arguments of the mid-twentieth century, such as those made by Frantz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X and Amílcar Cabral. It was they who foresaw that identity would take on a spectacularized form emptied of the messiness of humanity.

The review is divided into three sections. First, I present an overview of *The Neo-African-Americans*. Second, I examine the way in which contemporary blackness can be viewed through the framework of Guy Debord's notion of 'spectacle'.² The concluding section returns to the film in order to situate it in the context of an American spectacle of racial identity.

The Neo-African-Americans

Kobina Aidoo's film *The Neo-African-Americans* examines the ways in which immigrants from the Black and African Diaspora negotiate their identities in America. The film problematizes the term 'African-American', framing it as monolithic and as obfuscatory of the narratives, culture, and identity of foreign-born blacks and their American born offspring. Aidoo examines the variety of forms of voluntary immigration that get flattened under the dominant conception of the term that takes for granted the forced nature of Black migration to the US during slavery or the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Part of the problem, he tells us, is that one cannot distinguish ethnic Africans from Americans. Aidoo counters this by listening. He listens for what he calls the non-traditional African-American narrative. He asks: 'who are they; what makes them unique; what do we even call them; and what do they call themselves?'

The film opens with short vignettes that illustrate the complicated ways in which Aidoo's interviewees respond. I opened this essay with the same statements: I am a real African American (from Africa and America with no American slave history); I am more Haitian American than African-American; the term African American is invented by the white establishment; I am a staunch internationalist; I am a hybrid; I am a West Indian; I am a person; I am a black woman; I am an Afro-Latino; perhaps I could be African-American, but it is not my first choice; and, yes, I am African-American. These snippets of the larger conversation give weight to a film that moves from individualized position-taking to historical context to employment, education, Affirmative Action and back to individual claims.

In my view, the film can be divided into eight sections: 1) What is new about African-Americans? 2) The big question: are you African-American? 3) A history of Black migration to the US. 4) Discovering Blackness. 5) Entrepreneurial and educated immigrants. 6) Affirmative Action: restitution or diversity? 7) Blackness is not sameness, and 8) The second generation. In what follows, I detail each section of the film as I see it before moving into the discussion of an American spectacle of racial identity.

*What is new about African-Americans?*³

Aidoo outlines the micro-phenomenon that is the subject of his film. Between 1980 and 2005, the number of foreign-born blacks in the US tripled (Haitians quadrupled, Ethiopians increased 13 times). There are now three million foreign-born blacks in the US. In 2005, one million US-born black children had at least one foreign-born parent. These numbers are relatively small in terms of the US population as a whole, but Aidoo thinks they point to a trend of increasing black migration (and to undercurrents such as the foreign approaches to blackness that the immigrants bring with them) that might not remain under the radar for much longer. Black immigrants

are a growing population and are impacting notions of 'African American' and 'African American-ness' in particular because of the connection between the term African American and the idea of involuntary immigration. Furthermore, their demographic profile is distinct: 38 percent of African immigrants have attained Bachelor's degrees or higher. According to Adioo, the national average for all Americans is 28 percent. Historically, immigrants to America have arrived with very little and had to suffer being on the low spot on the totem pole. African immigrants, however, seem to either come with higher education, for higher education, and motivate their immigrant children to attain higher education. Therefore, this segment of the population is significantly more educated than the average American, black or white.

The big question: are you African-American?

Aidoo asks his interviewees, 'Are you African-American?' The answers are as follows:

- Yes, I am African American says a young woman from Memphis.
- A South African woman says she is African non-American. She says she does not want to be seen as American.
- A man expresses a migrant's ability to construct an identity. He lists all the languages he speaks, expresses so many potential identities and says that he is now a citizen which Americanizes his African-ness. So yes, he is African-American.
- A woman raised by Ghanaian parents in both the US and Ghana declares that she is a *true* African-American.
- A white American man who grew up in Africa responds that the question is loaded.
- A woman with an Ethiopian father and white American mother declares herself African-American.
- An African man who is married to a black American woman declares that he is *pure* African.
- A woman with a Panamanian father and a black American mother uses Panamanian and/or African-American in different contexts.
- A Spanish-speaking, Afro-Latino American says that there have been attempts at flattening the identity of Spanish speakers into Latino. For him, race still applies; hence the use of '*Afro*' in Afro-Latino.
- A Bahamian young man says this is so new to him, to think about race on a daily basis and how it affects his identity. He notes that he is solidly a part of the African diaspora.
- A woman says she is West Indian or a black woman. She supposes that insofar as she is naturalized, she could be African-American, but that is not her first choice.
- Her husband says that despite the fact that he has been in the US for 40 years, he considers himself Jamaican. He alludes to a power play around being perceived as an African-American male.
- A fellow from Montserrat (a British overseas territory located in the Leeward Islands of the Caribbean) views himself as an African, as a Pan-African rather than in racial terms as a black man which he considers African-American to be.

A history of Black migration to the US

Aidoo then sets these declarations in the context of American immigration policies in the twentieth century. We are told again that the African-American experience is typically expressed as a story that begins with slavery (involuntary immigration) to legal disenfranchisement to segregation, and is a narrative of victimization. Yet there are millions of blacks whose American experiences do not fit neatly in that story. For example, one could think of another 'African-American' history which begins with Cape Verdean whalers coming to the shores of New England.

In the 1860s, Cape Verdeans came. African immigration to the US did not pick up again until the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1900 and the 1920s and during a period of worldwide reduction in sugar cane production, Caribbeans started coming to the US. Racist immigration policies stemmed the flow by the 1930s and stayed that way until WWII when the US needed an influx of workers. Post-1965 saw increased Caribbean immigration to the US. African immigration reflected a different pattern. Part of this is the result of the 1986 Immigration and Control Act that allowed undocumented Africans to get their papers and become part of American society. A 1990 Immigration Act allowed for African immigration on the basis of skills and diversity.⁴

Discovering Blackness

Yvette Alex-Assensoh, a political scientist explains that Latin America and the Caribbean have fluid notions of race, while in the US, race trumps gender, race, class, ideology, party affiliation. For immigrants, colonization has inflected their experiences differently: ethnicity, culture, nation, geography are primary identifiers, not race. For example, the young Bahamian man wonders why he gets *whassup'd* while his white room mate does not. The answer, as it turned out, had to do with him being coded as Black and tied to a particular community despite his 'foreign-ness'. Similarly, others expressed confusion about what being Black meant. Their sense of self is not primarily raced. We are reminded that there is a certain trauma involved in coming to terms with the American racial hierarchy. Interviewees express confusion at having been racialized in ways that tie one to static positions. This is framed as having been shown one's place. Alex-Assensoh speaks of Africans and foreign blacks having a layered notion of identity while Americans have a single one: race. She tells us that the signifiers have to do with language, accents, customs, etc.

Entrepreneurial and educated immigrants

From the interviews in the film, we learn that immigrants come to work. They are characterised as a dynamic entrepreneurial population and, in the case of contemporary African immigrants, highly educated. Given this, immigrants 'do better' than American blacks. I infer that Aidoo means that they 'do better' economically. They work more hours, they are skilled and educated, and they are highly motivated. Aidoo queries whether they are taking the place of Black Americans in tertiary educational institutions. At some schools, students of immigrant origins make up 25 percent of the black population. At some of the most elite schools that number reaches 40 percent.

The Bahamian speaks of being a role model for black students at Duke University. He speaks of the harsh structural limitations based on race in the US and says that he can be a role model because he grew up in a place where everyone from the president to the janitor has been a black person. The young woman from Memphis disagrees with him. She says that she grew up in a majority black area with blacks in her AP classes and in a place where some of the richest people she knows are black. But she does not recognize the picture of systemic oppression that the Bahamian seems to recognize. They carry different baggage regarding structural inequality. We are shown that black immigrants carry a mindset of people whose cognitive framework was mapped in a black majority country unlike American blacks who are highly conscious/mindful of their place as a minority.

Affirmative Action: restitution or diversity?

In the film, one of the questions posed is: should Africans and other black immigrants benefit from Affirmative Action? Some who have been here for decades say yes. Others say that insofar as they distance themselves from the black community, no. We learn from Douglas Massey at Princeton University that Affirmative Action is a tricky thing. According to him, one can never say that any single person is a recipient of AA decisions because it is not applied in that categorical fashion. Racial origin is only one factor amongst many in decision-making processes and the weight it carries varies from place to place. Also, while Affirmative Action was put in place in 1965 in order to redress the contemporary legacy of past inequities, it has increasingly become a means of representing emerging diversity. If, indeed, it is only about restitution related to slavery and enslavement, then immigrant origin blacks should not benefit.

Blackness is not sameness

When asked about the relationship between native blacks and immigrant blacks, Aidoo's interviewees say:

- It's complicated.
- Strained.
- There is conflicts [*sic*].
- It's not lacking in tension.
- Volatile.
- It's a contentious relationship.
- Black Americans are provincial.
- Africans are ignorant of the deep structural inequality and sacrifice of Black Americans.
- Any tensions that exist are a TV-mediated representation.
- American blacks have made sacrifices.

The young Bahamian suggests that all of America is for the taking of all Americans regardless of race. He seems to be saying that even American blacks must come to recognize this and refuse to stay in their place. The South African woman

says that she would rather have a holistic conversation about everything including race. In her opinion, it is very reductionistic to think of everything in terms of race.

Alex-Assensoh reminds the viewer of the differences between immigration and existing racialized society. According to her, African-Americans (she means black Americans) are at the bottom of the socio-economic totem pole. All immigrants want to distance themselves from the bottom in order to succeed. Therefore, no immigrant, black or white, would want to cast their lot with black Americans. The immigrant, conversely, comes for opportunity, not to effect radical social change. Hierarchies of race allow them to distinguish themselves from American blacks by becoming a model minority. According to Alex Assensoh, employers are more willing to hire immigrant blacks thereby supporting black immigrant desire for upward mobility.

The second generation

The second generation complicates much of the information that this film conveys. We learn that this generation carries social knowledge in terms of food, of the ways in which they were raised, languages other than American English, and social capital of other types. The film closes with a meeting of the Africa Diaspora Group at Harvard University. We see the students discussing race in America and creating a space for different kinds of Blacks to exist together while recognizing historical trajectories impacted by both voluntary and involuntary migration. We are told that black immigrant associations are proliferating in order to socialize children and youth and that one characteristic of the second generation is a higher sense of transnationalism.

Aidoo ends on a positive note. Young people today are asking harder questions and finding more nuanced ways of responding to American racial hierarchies. Black immigrants have always influenced America: Louis Farrakhan, Malcolm X, Colin Powell, Adam Clayton, W.E.B. DuBois, Barack Obama. Yet, one of the last points that Alex-Assensoh makes is that the term Black is inclusive while the term African-American is exclusive.

The American spectacle of racial identity

Alex-Assensoh's final point begs the question why Aidoo used the term Neo-African American for the title of the film, which does not seem to be about them. Aidoo is not arguing that the term African-American serves to separate immigrants from *real Americans*. He is also not suggesting that identities are exclusive and therefore political. He does not reference the complex, opportunistic, and sometimes painfully honest ways that people negotiate the hierarchical structures that may be alien to them. Rather, Aidoo is making the case against a specific conception of the term African-American. We can see this in his frequent comments distinguishing voluntary migration from involuntary migration. He leaves unproblematic the processes of contemporary racial identification that, I would suggest, have economic and political underpinnings and that, ironically, his film reveals. Listening to the reflections of black immigrants seems to tell us more about blackness in twenty-first-century America than about the term African-American.

In this section, I will explore the underpinnings of two issues that emerge from my synopsis of the film above. The first is the rather contemporary requirement that people carry an identity that is ethnicized or racialized. The film accepts, or at least does not problematize, the premise that identity (ethnicity, race, etc.) is a function of biology or of inherent differences. The second is the idea that tensions exist between the new immigrant blacks and American Americans. In *The Neo-African Americans*, Aidoo accepts the existence of these troubled relations and frames those relations as a misunderstanding, a problem of representation (media and otherwise) of vulgar American ghettos and backward, uncivilized Africans.

What allows us to link these two points is the presence of the capitalist economy. Aidoo refers to involuntary migration, but what we are really talking about is the Atlantic slave trade, which was nothing if not the commodification of African bodies and *for profit*. That these bodies come to 'carry' race is a function of the need for enforced labor. That people then come to identify in abstract ways with others across nation, ethnicity, and race is a function of a particular form of economy that connects industrialism, colonialism and imperialism.⁵ In other words, the development of these imagined communities has always served the interests of capital at various nodal points. If we see a connection between identity and industrialism in the past and in the classic works on nationalism, how do we see this connection now in a post-industrial era? This is where Guy Debord's concept of 'spectacle' comes in. If 'the agent of the spectacle ... is the opposite of the individual, the enemy of the individual',⁶ then, while the agent of discourse is a person, the agent of 'spectacle' is the *illusion of a person*. Further, if post-industrial societies are 'societies of the spectacle' as Debord would claim, then 'spectacle' underpins any discussion on race, identity, migration, etc., especially one concerned with social hierarchy and the distribution of resources, such as the one evinced in Aidoo's *The Neo-African-Americans*. Arguably, this is the context within which negotiations around race take place in the US, including those depicted in the film.

Further, if Paul Gilroy is correct in his argument that black American culture derives from a history of dehumanizing practices that were assuaged by the incorporation of blacks into the cult of consumerism which in turn served to avoid humanizing them, then the dominant version of black American culture (the one that is globalized) is also spectacularized. Bourgeois African-Americans can be seen to operate in parallel institutions to those of bourgeois White Americans. Fraternities, sororities, alongside other constructions of middle-class gender roles that privilege consumptive behavior work as a way of developing a rigidly bounded form of racialized group solidarity and ironically, of staking a claim to the illusion of the only 'non-racialized' American: the consumer. Insofar as this evinces Debord's spectacle, it is a-human and stands in for relations between (illusions of) actors. Race as a signifier, then, is part of this illusion. Hence, Aidoo's question 'Are you African American?' takes on a whole new dimension. And the complex answers can also be given context.

Conclusion: the illusion of the new African-American

In *The Neo-African Americans*, Kobina Aidoo addresses a topic that has received very superficial attention, the disinclination of African immigrants to identify as African-American. Aidoo also exposes the disparate and often intricate ways that people stake a claim to a black identity in America. Given the growing number of

foreign-born Blacks and their offspring, his point that the term African-American is contentious is a serious one. His short-sighted solution is to proffer the term Neo-African-American. Rather than framing American structures of race as dehumanizing as did some of the most progressive thinkers of the twentieth century, Aidoo attempts to *add* alternative forms of blackness to the same framework that is responsible for the exclusion in the first place. Thus, his claim to have made the film in order to attach voluntary migration to the term 'African-American' is both shallow and limited by his interviewees' own reflections. Their words can be read as a claim to human-ness by people who either have not internalized a dehumanized version of blackness or, in the case of the second and third generations, people who have access to powerful competing discourses of race and other forms of identity. This reading reveals the outlines of a twenty-first-century American hierarchy of race that is spectacularized rather than post-racial. This film reminds me that some of our twentieth-century thinkers were progressive precisely because they foresaw the way in which dehumanizing tactics that served to secure a racialized division of labor would morph into spectacular forms of identity.

Aidoo's *The Neo African Americans* is a complex intervention into racial social structures on exactly the terms of that structure. Yet, in so far as he allows his interviewees' voices to bellow, the film exposes perhaps more than Aidoo intended. For the conversation that it will no doubt engender, it should be required viewing.

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Notes

1. *The Neo-African-Americans: Black Immigrant Identities*, directed by Kobina Aidoo, DVD, 57 minutes.
2. Debord (1983).
3. These statistics are drawn from the film and from the film's website: <http://neo-africanamericans.wordpress.com/the-numbers/> (accessed 30 August 2010). (Numbers compiled from 'Immigration and America's Black Population' by Mary Mederios Kent and the 2007 American Community Survey by US Census Bureau.)
4. This information can also be found in Taylor and Tuch (2007).
5. See Anderson (1991); Weber (1976).
6. Debord (1983, no. 61).

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