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Culture Currents Introduction

Presented by P. Bruce Uhrmacher and Jodie L. Wilson

We contacted a leading education theorist and scholar in education and asked him to answer three questions:

1. What books, essays or poetry have you read in the past year that have inspired you, influenced your thinking or impacted you emotionally for whatever reason? [**Hitler's American Model**, James Whitman 2017, Princeton University Press; documents the connection between American race law [1880-1930] and the Nazi construction of Nuremburg Race Laws. Helped me better comprehend the dynamics of discrimination in the USA;
2. What performances, music, websites or other media have you encountered in the past year that have inspired you, influenced your thinking or stuck with you for whatever reason? [Bruno Mars (Your face) and Pink (the rest of us); first is powerful popular expression of simple love and the Pink captures the lament of the oppressed.]
3. How (or why) have any or all of the above entries influenced you? (Optional) [Helped to further humanize my thinking and perceptions]

We pointed out that other educators would like to know what is on their minds. What follows is the response from William E. Cross, Jr., Professor of Higher Education and Counseling Psychology at the Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, USA. Dr. Cross is a leading theorist and scholar in Black identity development and is the author of *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity*. "His recent publications interrogate the structure of the self-concept; the range of identity profiles found among African American adults; cultural epiphanies; the identity implications of cultural miseducation and false consciousness; and the multiple ways racial identity is enacted in everyday life. He is a dedicated audiophile and is never far from music."
(<http://morgridge.du.edu/programs/counseling-psychology/faculty/>)

Black Identity Dynamics: Stigma management, Cultural Attachment and Individuality

Not long after the publication of a journal article explicating the way ethnic-racial identity is enacted in everyday life (Cross et al., 2017), I was invited to give a keynote address at the 2017 University of Akron Black Male Symposium. While not a transcript, the following narrative is

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guided by the outline used in the presentation. The lecture-workshop was divided into four segments:

1. Black identity and the challenges faced in everyday life;
2. Community: Being born Black versus “becoming” Black;
3. Individuality: Understanding the personality component to one’s self-concept; and
4. Meaning in life and the fact that you only live once.

Black identity and challenges faced everyday

Within the field of Africana [Black] Studies, the term Black has two meanings; one signifies ‘race’ the other culture. The study and analysis of racially restrictive voting rights laws passed by various states – in the aftermath of the US Supreme Court Decision gutting the 1965 Voting Rights Law (2013 US Supreme Court Decision: *Shelby County V Holder*, 2013) – presents an acceptable use of the term race. Black studies are about ‘race’ when the focus is the history, sociology or the political analysis of *racial oppression and stigmatization*. However, “Black-studies” means culture, when the focus shifts to the arts, literature, dance, jazz, and the humanities. In this instance, jazz or hip-hop as *race-music* or Niki Giovanni (1970) as a *race-poet* are inappropriate usages of the term race.

One more thing; this apparent ‘confusion’ about the difference between race and culture emerged from the very folks who first employed the concept. As Europeans sailed the seas and ‘discovered’ people living here and there, they ‘named’ the continents and people they ‘discovered’. As they, Europeans, were the ones doing the discovering and had armaments to overcome and dominate the newly discovered folk, Europeans assumed that their

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adventuresome ways and dominant power were marks of racial superiority, because, from their point of view, only the superior discovered and dominated others.

While they assigned racial labels to people based on physical differences (race as a biological concept) – with the European ‘body’ as the point of reference – they also assumed that race explained differences in language, religion, customs, intellect, institutions, etc. In this sense, European pseudoscientists racialized not only the ‘body’ but almost anything associated with the people being racialized. This reveals the close association of *political power and one’s definition of race*, as race can mean anything those in power want it to mean: being Jewish is not a race but the Nazis racialized the Jewish faith; speaking Arabic and holding Islamic ideas are not markers of race but Islamophobics believe to the contrary; being Mexican and speaking Spanish does not make for a race, but ethnocentrism links race with being Mexican. While the original intent of a racial analysis and racial hierarchy were said to be biological, the socio-political corollary – stigmatization – has persisted through time. Stigma is central to understanding what race means and how it is used to oppress, even though race has no scientific validity.

This morning my focus is on the individual Black person and the question of racial-cultural identity development. In this room, you are surrounded by Black people who range in age from 15 to 77, and older! This means that, taken together, we represent hundreds of years of experience on what it means to be Black and successful in a society that racializes. As this is a Black Male Symposium, obviously, the focus today is on how does one live and achieve success, while being Black and male in the United States. In a play on the concept of driving while Black, today we discuss *achieving success while being Black and male*.

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In the *Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903: 2008) spoke of one's double consciousness but in reality, a *four-fold* consciousness is more accurate. First, we are *human beings* as differentiated from a two-tiered cultural sense of self that fuses two orientations – one American the other African-American – and lastly there are those who view us through the pseudoscientific lens of 'race'. Because of their socio-political power, our lives are often constricted to the point that one's *racial sense of self* supersedes one's sense of self as a cultural-being or human-being. In today's conversation, I will make frequent reference to the categories *racial-being* and *cultural-being*. Note, the issue is not with all White people, but those who see us in racial terms.

Black Parents Raising Black Children: Triple Quandary Theory

Findings from racial-socialization research (Hughes et al., 2009) show parents of Black, Latinx, Mexican and Native American youth stress three themes: discrimination, pride and achievement. In an attempt to synthesize such findings, A. Wade Boykin (1986) speaks of the *Triple Quandary Theory* of racial socialization, where Black parents wrestle with how to prepare Black children for 1) experiences with discrimination, i.e. experiences as a *racial-being*; 2) mainstream interactions that support and sustain one's schooling, employment, health care needs, bank transactions, etc.; and 3) socialization leading to a sense of belonging and attachment to one's socially ascribed community. Taking this a step further, Cross et al. (2017) focus on the way racial-cultural identity is enacted or 'performed' in everyday life, using the categories *buffering*, *code-switching*, *bridging*, *attachment-bonding*, *Internalized Racism*, and *individuality*. Three of these enactments combine to reveal the ability to 'manage' one's stigma status or sense of being a *racial object* in the minds of people who think in racial terms, while

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attachment-bonding explicates the development and sustaining of a “group or cultural” identity:

- **Buffering** captures the various ways a person may negotiate encounters with discrimination, hatred, and oppressive interactions with the police or other mainstream authority figures. Knowing how to protect yourself while being cool and staying under control, buffering seeks to contain Black rage and anger, or transform such negative energy into proactive actions and activities.
- **Code-switching** the ability to shift one’s identity and *social presentation of self* in order to be in conformance with the cultural expectations, demand characteristics, success matrixes/analytics of workplaces, schools, hospitals and other key institutions situated outside one’s community and within what is called ‘mainstream’ society; to *go back and forth* between one’s community and the mainstream community;
- **Bridging** speaks to one’s openness, desire and ability to effectuate friendships and intimacy across racial-ethnic boundaries.

Buffering, Code-switching, and Bridging explicate the multiple ways a person – stigmatized and perceived in racial terms – performs the *psychology of stigma management*. In situations of threat, the objective is to achieve identity and self-concept ‘protection’ (Buffering). We do not know who, but in the future, some of the Black males in this room will be pulled over by the police. We hope most of these encounters are caught on cell phones, but one of the purposes of this symposium is to ensure that those cell phone videos show Black males alive and well following such encounters. The *Black Lives Matter* social movement is working to change the attitudes of the police and the society and this symposium aims to help you to be

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better equipped – psychologically speaking – so that you can move on with your life. Being stopped by the police can instantly stir your emotions, but keeping one’s cool is essential.

Cancer is a horrible disease and Black people are at risk of a kind of psychological cancer called Black rage and anger. Once unleashed, it can become destructive to both self and others. Do whatever you must and move on from the encounter; afterwards, you may feel you have lost ‘face’ but walk away alive and well and ready to embrace what’s ahead. Ten years from now we want you to return to this university to instruct the next generation of boys and men on how to survive encounters with the police.

Police shootings notwithstanding, most interactions between Black people and various figures from the White community are benign. We interact with Whites in school, the workplace and numerous other settings, and rather than vigilance and identity protection, these exchanges call upon our capacity to code-switch. Code-switching is the psychological mechanism servicing our needs, wants and desires that are related to employment, schooling-education, banking, health care, insurance, leisure activities, etc. These wants, needs and desires can only be fulfilled through intense daily interactions with White people that take place within mainstream institutions. Code switching speaks to the development of bi-cultural competence that allows one to function, at a high level, within two cultural realms: the mainstream and the Black community. The image is that of a Black person comfortable and competent in mainstream contexts – as well as within the Black community – meaning one has the wherewithal to move back and forth between one’s community and the mainstream. Most of the Black adults in this room are educated and strongly identify with the Black community. Many a time when the phone rang at our home, my wife moved with a ghetto-shuffle-walk

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toward the phone, and I knew instantly whether she was talking to a White person. She switched from Ebonics to a version of standard English that made one think I married, not a sister from the tiny ghetto of South Norwalk, Connecticut, but a Black immigrant from England or sister from the British Bahamas. *Being Black and successful is a not a contradiction, as we are acculturated* not assimilated. Even in the world of Hip-Hop, successful artists turned businessmen Puff Daddy and Snoop Dog exhibit the skills to interact with bankers, lawyers and accountants. Central to anyone's success is the development of one's mind, and such intellectual development comes from education: the longer one's schooling, the more developed and refined one's mind and intellect. We need Black males to graduate from high school, enter college, and eventually become successful across all walks of life. There is no one preferred major or career path, as the Black community needs people who are successful and represent a wide-range of careers.

When one thinks about buffering as compared to code-switching, it becomes clear that to live a successful Black life can be complicated, to say the least. In situations calling for buffering, one's psychological state is geared toward vigilance, identity protection, and moving away from White people, while code switching involves moving toward, entering, and being successful in White spaces. Many, if not most, of the Black adults here today have achieved considerable success within the mainstream, and in almost every instance, each can name at least one or a handful of White people who assisted them in their success. While racial oppression may constrict the diversity of one's social network, successful persons of color have achieved friendships and even intimacy across racial boundaries. The ability to negotiate close

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relationships across racial boundaries is called Bridging. In today's increasingly multicultural world, the ability to communicate and work with a wide range of diverse people is critical.

In summary, being a racial-being requires psychological flexibility ranging from the capacity to identity-protect (Buffering), a chameleon-like ability to identity shift (Code-Switching) and the capacity, openness and motivation to achieve friendship or intimacy across racial boundaries (Bridging). Such enactments define the psychological work that goes into the management of one's status as a racial-being, where race carries not biological but highly significant socio-political meaning best understood as stigmatization. DuBois called this stigma the "Veil" (1903: 2008), while others call it the "mask" -- either concept conveys the fact that to be beautiful and Black and successful, one must negotiate negative, benign, matter-of-fact, and even close relations with some White people. Please know that teaching you to fully comprehend that in the eyes of some people, you are a racial-being, not a human being -- is not an easy thing for us to communicate. We do so with pain and regret but we want to be real and tell it like it is. The psychology of stigma management is built around buffering, code-switching and bridging and is your guide to a future good life.

Community: Black at Birth versus Becoming Culturally Black

The dynamics of stigma management can overshadow the fact that the same person capable of performing the above enactments, is, in other contexts, a cultural-being, whose group affiliation needs and sense of belonging are transacted within one's community. At this turn in our discussion, we encounter the distinction to be made between *nominal* identity and *achieved* identity. At birth, the larger society may classify the infant as a "Black child" and that becomes the newborn's (temporary) nominal identity. It is a title-label and category and has

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little meaning to the infant. The infant's socialization and general upbringing will determine if he or she evolves a sense of Blackness (achieved identity) or will come to embrace another identity perspective that accords limited importance to race and Black culture (i.e., an alternate identity), such as an Assimilationist or Humanist perspective (Cross and Fhagen-Smith, 2001). The second part of the article by Cross et al. (2017) covering various identity performances explicates enactments important to one's holding a cultural identity: the self as a cultural-being. If buffering, code-switching, and bridging provide insight into the way management of one's stigma is a lived experience, the next set of enactments reveal how the culture side of one's cultural identity is lived: *Attachment-Bonding*; *Intra-Group Buffering*; and a final category that stands apart from the discussion of any type of group identity – *Individuality*.

Attachment-Bonding: From the perspective of developmental psychology, an infant at birth is born with the capacity to become human, and that potential turns into reality after an infant becomes attached to a caretaker and people close to the caretaker (family, kin, siblings, etc.). Following an untold number of human interactions between infant and the caretaker-family-kin-sibling human cluster – with the increasing input of play friends, neighbors and school mates – by age 12 the infant-turned-preadolescent exhibits a distinctive personality, interpersonal-style and range of relationship patterns.

The evolution of a sense of connection and belonging to a group reveals a similar pattern, in that attachment-bonding emerges from thousands of interactions, experiences, and memories, of the way the group dances, sings, plays, speaks, argues, celebrates, marries, divorces, worships and eulogizes its dead. Once internalized, attachment to Blackness becomes second nature to how one thinks, feels, acts, and finds meaning in life. *Not that there is one-*

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way to be Black. In the university and college level discussions of identity, we use the term “positionality” to capture the saying from the street: “Hey, where are you coming from?” For example, a Black person born and raised in rural Mississippi is generally not expected to see things as might a brother or sister from the South Side of Chicago. Thus, Black people differ by place of birth (North, South, East or West the United States; Africa, Caribbean, Central America, various parts of Europe, etc.), language (English, Ebonics, French, German, African dialect etc.), as well as age, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, political affiliation, and so on and so forth. Each of these social factors may help explain where a brother or sister is coming from.

A person’s Black point of view, once internalized, can influence friendship selection, mate preference, political ideology, worldview, manner of self-presentation (dress, make-up hairstyle, etc.), and an inner sense that the group values and cares about me. Attachment-bonding can shape how one thinks-feels-acts. The underside of attachment-bonding is prejudice and bias against people, places, and things not representative of one’s group (i.e. hatred, and feelings of disdain toward those not like oneself). On the other hand, in the face of social obstacles, attachment-bonding can lead to social action and social movements.

Although attachment-bonding can result from interactions taking place from infancy to early adulthood, many are raised and socialized such that they enter adolescence or early adulthood with an underdeveloped sense of belonging to the Black community. When one’s identity is in fact positive but does not incorporate a Black perspective, one may not become “awoke” till some other time in life. This can lead to an identity-conversion or epiphany, where, for a short period, the individual immerses her/himself in a dramatic and intense identity re-shaping process (Cross, 1971; 1991). From this process, a low or negative regard for one’s

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connection to the group is replaced with high regard, high salience, and a strength of connection, along the same lines as that achieved by others through socialization between infancy and adulthood. In this sense, identity conversion is a way of 'catching up'.

Attachment-bonding is not simply an internal psychological state. It can be a window on the world that, when combined with certain talents, results in a Black novelist writing stories about Black characters, a Black screenwriter constructing a movie script on Black experiences, a Black musician's preference for jazz or hip hop, a Black social scientist's motivation to conduct research on Black identity. Attachment-bonding results in Black cultural identity that, in turn, gives birth to Black cultural expressions. Research shows that persons who are subject to stigmatization by the larger society are better able to defend and buffer themselves when they face such encounters with strong knowledge about the history and experiences of one's group. That is to say that attachment-bonding is a protective factor as well as a progenitor of Black culture.

Attachment-Bonding and Innovation: At this point, I need to insert an important aside. I recently attended a presentation by the amazing scholar of Black culture, Reiland Rabaka (2011), and in an exchange, he helped me realize that code switching can result in innovation. Jazz resulted when African Americans entered White musical spaces to play European instruments [saxophone, flute, bass violin, drums, etc.], but they performed with a sense of space, rhythm and syncopation traceable to Africa and the Caribbean. Because of time limitations, my examples of innovation will be taken from music. The Modern Jazz Quartet dressed in formal attire befitting a symphony orchestra and began each selection with a very scripted opening, with solo free-lancing intertwined. Gill Evans and Miles Davis collaborated to

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produce two long works, one based on the opera *Porgy and Bess* and another derived from classical Spanish compositions (*Sketches of Spain*). Nina Simone, who began as a classical pianist, played jazz solos that clearly showed the influences of Bach, in particular, as was also true of Dave Brubeck. Bill Evans' work integrated the sensibilities of Debussy, Ravel and Chopin. Jimmy Hendrix invented cultural loops starting with a Black-blues sensibility fused with a White rock-and-roll aesthetic, then he looped back to outrageous electronic blasts and flourishes that could neither be classified as Black or White. It became the Hendrix sound! The Broadway hit musical "*Hamilton*" is another example of innovation resulting from the fusion of a Black aesthetic – this time the Hip Hop genre– with European history and culture. Innovation can work both ways, as Picasso's otherwise European aesthetic was radically transformed upon his exposure to African art and the African sensibility about movement, form and shape. The composer Steve Reich freely admits that the music of Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and other jazz giants were sources of inspiration in the evolution of his approach to modern composition.

The point is that code-switching is more than finding ways to fit-in, conform and be accepted, it becomes a tower from which to see things differently, and think with renewed imagination and creativity. From Willie May's waist-high basket catches, Michael Jordan's acrobatic gyrations, Biggie-Small's infectious grunts or Tupac Shakur's' mesmerizing poetry, the overlooked skills of NASA's (Shetterly, 2016) "hidden-figures" (Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughan), to the lyrical sounds of Duke Ellington, African Americans have provided America with an amazing array of gifts, made possible by explosive cultural creativity generated by code-switching dynamics.

Intra-Group Buffering: Our earlier discussion of buffering focused on the way race and discrimination are controlled and imposed by the “Other”; however, members of racial-cultural minority groups must negotiate another form of negativity embedded in interactions with people from one’s own community: Internalized racism. Negative stereotypes and negative, pejorative and dehumanizing images created in the imagination of the Other can become inserted into the mind’s eye of the oppressed, causing people to be misguided, miseducated and in the worst-case scenario, self-hating. This image of Black people as damaged goods and pathological has been overplayed, sensationalized and exaggerated. More often than not, Black people are average/normal people in the grasp of impossible situations for which there is no correct behavior.

- When people are ensnared in abnormal, hostile and unsupportive places, such places can make survival-behavior seem extreme and abnormal;
- When schools communicate to Black students that Black people are inferior, dropping out of school can become a rational act (Fine, 1991);
- When sports and extracurricular activities are stripped from our schools, young people find other places to express their artistic talents and need for cultural joy;
- When employment is not an option, perfectly normal young men and women fall in love anyway, and children are often born out-of-wedlock;
- When hope is lost, normal people are drawn to drugs and other escapes; the current opioid addiction ravaging White communities is not an expression of personal pathology; it is normal people discovering that as far as the larger society is concerned, they are redundant and disposable.

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- When normal adolescents see no future, their normal frustrations may be expressed in open hostility toward members of their own community. While the Black community has its predictable percentage of sociopaths, most gang-banger homicides are committed by normal Black youth driven toward acts of desperation for general survival (Payne, 2006).

It may be hard for you to imagine, but almost every adult Black person in this room grew up in a poor community. Almost all of us are a few steps from the ghetto. In the face of what sometimes seemed like insurmountable obstacles, we found that with resolve, focus and support coming from our own community, tomorrow was always a better day. Please do not sell us short; we do know what you are going through and we are here to tell you that success is a possibility. Your skin color does not seal your fate, but it can represent a challenge, one that can be successfully surmounted. We are here to help.

You Only Live Once

I want to end with this final message: I am 77 years old and if one thing is clear to me at this moment, it is the fact that you only live once. Life starts with finding meaning and faith in yourself. You will fall – but get up. You will fail sometimes before you succeed. You will experience disappointment in yourself and others and this will make new connections precious. Watch out for the lure of street life; it is a place made of quicksand and fool's gold that can lead to incarceration and even death. As you leave, take a good look at the Black folks who surround you. You may be tempted to discount our optimism, as currently we are each successful, but this misses the point that as we look at you we see what was once ourselves. You remind us of our own point of departure way back when. Now it is your turn. Begin today to chart a path to your

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own success and reach back and bring someone along with you. Make it a together-thing. We did it and so can you. *Really.*

In Closing

In this conversation and discussion, I requested that you stop and consider four ways one can think about what it means to be Black and male in the United States of America:

1. *Racial-being*: It is not easy to walk right up to the disturbing fact that some people see us – Black people – as less than human; they are fearful we will hurt them, will tear down their personal property, will lower standards, and will destroy the beauty of America. Ironically, most scientists are in general agreement that race has no basis in fact as a biological construct. Yet so convinced are some powerful people that race is a valid concept that they use their power to limit where we live, control where we work, constrain whether we can vote or not, and put us at risk when interacting with authority. That said, today we have dared to imagine what success looks like while being Black and male. We described the psychological tools of buffering, code-switching, and bridging as instrumental to Black success.
2. *Cultural being*: We asked you to take ownership of the reality that almost everyone in this room has a two-sided cultural profile – part American and part African-American. We were brutally honest in noting that there is no one way to be Black; the meaning of Black identity varies from one person to another. Nevertheless, we encourage you to give serious thought to the importance of developing a positive attachment to Black people, Black culture and the Black experience;

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3. *Individuality:* We noted that everyone in this room is different in terms of personality, interactional style and quality of interpersonal relationships. As individuals, we are unique in the way we express our humanity.

In discussing how we live and breathe being Black in everyday life, we listed and then discussed each enactment separately; however, in real life one may switch from one modality to another, at the drop of a dime. Consider Jackie Robinson. In breaking the major-league baseball color barrier, Jackie Robinson fused buffering, code-switching, and innovation. He entered a White space (major league baseball), found ways to psychologically protect himself (buffering), exhibited a masterful level of understanding and competence about the way the game should be played (code-switching), introduced innovations (stealing home base as a base runner), and eventually had White associates (Bridging) who enjoyed his company (Pee Wee Reese) or provided him some degree of in-house protection, at the level of management (Branch Rickey). His success was the sum of all these parts. Beside courage, daring, resilience, and persistence, he showed the ability to be flexible in his Blackness, displaying, not a Johnny-One-Note expression, but a repertoire of identity skills and enactments. You can too.

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