

# Authenticity and Cultural Identity

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## 1. Introduction

The following is a rough patchwork of ideas arising from my recent work on existentialist ethics. My broad goal has been to elaborate the virtue of *authenticity* by attending to and where possible augmenting Jean-Paul Sartre's writings, especially his postwar works. Authenticity, I think, is something more than "being true to oneself;" it is a robustly social virtue which requires an agent to be recognized by a community of others. In what follows I sketch out existential authenticity as distinct from essential authenticity, and then consider an existential approach to Jewish identity. The paper concludes with some remarks about personal vs. political visions of authenticity.

## 2. Authenticity: Existentialism vs. Essentialism

I begin by characterizing two different notions of authenticity, one which Sartre criticized (the "essentialist" view of authenticity) and one which he advocated (the "existentialist" view of authenticity). For simplicity, I state the difference schematically:

- The essentialist view of authenticity holds that a person is authentic to the extent that he conforms to an orthodox or essential conception of membership in his group. One's essence is considered an unchangeable, inner metaphysical principle.
- By contrast, existentialism does not define authenticity in term of a person's similarity to an original pattern, model or exemplar; an authentic person is not construed as an ideal "type" or a member who incarnates a species most perfectly. Rather, existential authenticity consists in lucidly, self-consciously, critically choosing a coherent self-identity.

One implication of the existentialist model is *pluralism* about authentic identities. A person may be authentic while departing from the classical, orthodox, historically accepted definitions of authenticity.

A second implication is *voluntarism* about identity. In contrast to biological determinism or cultural fatalism, existentialism emphasizes the chosen-ness of identity. Objective facts about us exist, but these are social facts whose meaning, weight and importance are determined by how they are lived.

This second implication causes some difficulty, especially when considering (what I will call) a person's *cultural identity*, which is rooted in custom, especially linguistic, religious and familial customs. We usually think of our cultural identities as having a fatalistic dimension: they choose us; we do not choose them. We do not elect which culture to be raised in, which language will be our mother-tongue, or which religion (if any) our parents will practice, and so on. *It is an open question whether existentialism's voluntarism about identity can accommodate*

*the strong intuition that our cultural identities are discovered, not invented, that they are fundamentally beyond our individual control, and that they are bigger and broader than the narrative of “choice” suggests.*

Let me state that the existentialist to whom I am most indebted, Sartre, doesn't always take the time to explain voluntarism with the nuances that he should. He often exaggerates and dramatizes. His claim in *Being and Nothingness* that humans are “radically free” no matter what their situation is sometimes interpreted as the view that every dimension of our identity is chosen. In a manner of speaking, he tells us, we even choose to be born. But in that same work, Sartre depicts a fundamentally non-voluntary dimension of the self which is imposed by “the look” of others. The look refers to the fact that who I am (my self-identity) is not just a matter of how *I* see myself. Other people shape and constitute me. The self is not just a product of my freedom, it is also a product of the freedom of others.

While in his earliest works Sartre was skeptical about the possibility of a positive, non-alienating look, in the postwar period he began to reverse himself by exploring the concrete possibility of community through art (*What is Literature?*), practical cooperation (*Notebooks for an Ethics*) and political struggle (*Anti-Semite and Jew*). In his Marxist work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* the notion of *reciprocity* took center stage. In the postwar period Sartre thought about how the look of others might become the basis of community rather than alienation. While he had always accepted Hegel's idea that the presence of others creates an ontologically real dimension of the self (being-for-others), he initially thought there was no way to reconcile this dimension with the subjective dimension of the self (being-for-itself). I believe his postwar works abandon this “pessimism” about Hegelian recognition. If that's correct, then the chief existentialist virtue, *authenticity*, must also be reconsidered from the perspective of

interpersonal recognition. When Beauvoir distanced existentialist ethics from “an ethics of solipsism” in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she sought to develop the social implications of genuineness. Sartre quipped in his *Notebook* that “no-one can be ethical alone.” An ethical conversion would require the agent to attune himself to the judgments of others, both on the structural and individual level.

Take a simple example of the connection between authenticity and recognition: let’s say I am a budding musician and I begin to identify myself with this label “musician.” If other people do not *see me as* a musician, then my self identity is at best weak and impoverished. If I begin to perform publicly for an audience, this strengthens my self-identity by making it *explicit* and *objective*, rather than merely *implicit and subjective*. If I were to remain trapped in the schizophrenic doubling of consciousness which Sartre described in *Being and Nothingness*, where being-for-itself and being-for-others could never be matched up, then indeed, all human relations would be alienating. But, if the look can be made concrete, not ontological, if the look can be re-described socially rather than metaphysically, then de-alienation is possible.

The notion of “the look” has obvious implications for the possibility of authentically affirming a cultural identity. We can’t define our cultural identities by fiat; the judgments of others inform and in part constitute our identities. Cultural identities are not purely private affairs. Take the case of Barak Obama. On the mock news show “The Colbert Report” columnist Debra Dickerson argued that Obama is not “Black” because he does not descend from American Slaves.<sup>1</sup> Dickerson’s claim illustrates the power of “the look.” Dickerson interprets Obama as seeking the recognition of the “Black” community, and she believes he is not entitled to this recognition. The legitimacy of Dickerson’s comments aside, what is revealed is that Obama is not free to identify with just any culture or community that he chooses. He controls

only whether or not to seek recognition from this or other communities, not whether or not he will receive recognition. Others form judgments about Obama's identity, and these judgments *co-constitute* his identity. His choices come up against a set of *social facts* about his own identity. It may well be that Dickerson's judgment is idiosyncratic, unrepresentative of the community (or communities) to which Obama is appealing. It may be that Obama can safely disregard this particular look. The question turns on whose recognition Obama is seeking. For whom is he defining himself? Who is his public? Regardless of the answer to these particular questions, they show that existentialism is not a solipsistic ethics; it asserts that there must be *some* community or another to whom Obama appeals for his recognition, otherwise he's in the grips of a shallow, hollow notion of himself.

The fact that one has to appeal to a community to ratify one's cultural identity is both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes we feel alienated by others' judgments, for instance when others accuse us of being fakers, frauds and passers. But unless others had *power* over us, we would never experience the positive side of the look, which is the experience of *belonging*. Belonging or social solidarity, as described phenomenologically by Sartre, requires seeing one's self in the other and becoming a "common" person by participating in the work of the group. It can be experienced in many ways in many contexts, from interpersonal communication, to political rallies, to religious holidays, to family dinners. The power of other people implies that authentic self-identities cannot be bottled up, sheltered, hidden or secret. They must live openly and publicly. If there is no community which *recognizes* me and validates my self-identity, then my identity is inauthentic. None of us is free to declare for himself any old cultural identity he wishes to pick out of a hat. *But—and this is the crucial point—the objective limits to self-declaration are not biological facts about us, but social facts about those communities within*

*which our self-identities become meaningful.* The upshot is that even the existential view of identity, which emphasizes the *choice* of one's cultural identity, holds that there are limits to what can be coherently chosen.

Now that I have sketched the existential view of authenticity, let me characterize the *essentialist* concept of authenticity. Essentialism is the attempt to reduce a developmental process into a something static and thing-like. The concept of "human nature" is a case in point. Existentialists hold that humans have a structure which distinguishes them from other beings, but they refuse to attribute to humans some internal principle which propels action. Generalizations like "All people are selfish" are essentialist because they assume that people have an inner law which causes action. Essentialism is a type of determinism.

One relevant form of essentialist thinking is (what I will call for current purposes) the *cultural racism* which accompanied anti-immigration nativism during the turn of the century in the US.<sup>ii</sup> While biological racial sciences like Craniometry contended that there were essential biological differences marking race, the racism accompanying anti-immigrant measures appealed to inherent *cultural but not biological* racial differences. Asians were a particular target of these claims. Justice Harlan of the US Supreme Court expressed a popular sentiment when he wrote the Chinese were a separate race who were inherently ill-suited for US citizenship. Ironically, Harlan made this point in his *dissent* to the pro-segregation *Plessy* decision of 1896 which argued for a "separate but equal" set of social institutions for blacks and whites. Harlan maintained that American Blacks, descended from Africa, were racially distinct from both whites and Asians (ex. Chinese and Japanese). But Harlan went on to argue that Blacks were *better suited* than Asians to becoming American citizens. Asians were fundamentally "inassimilable."<sup>iii</sup> The stereotype of the backwards, unintelligent "heathen Chinese" would subsequently lead to

regressive federal measures restricting and occasionally banning immigration from Asian countries.

Harlan's thinking is obviously marred by essentialism. What is particularly interesting for current purposes, however, is the *dialectical breakdown* that occurred when the Court found no biological evidence supporting common racial categories. Rather than abandoning race as a category, the Court "disposed of science" (as historian Mae M. Ngai has shown<sup>iv</sup>) and defined the category "white" according to a "common person" standard. "What we now hold is that the words 'free white persons' are words of *common speech*, to be interpreted with the understanding of the *common man*."<sup>v</sup> In two key decisions, *Takao Ozawa v. U.S.* (1922) and *U.S. v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923), the Court had the conscience to reject appeals to biology as defining whiteness, but it nonetheless held firm to the notion of inalienable *traits of character* which define whiteness. Ozawa went to high school and college in California, spoke perfect English and went to an American church on Sunday with his white wife and their children, but he was not, the court found, eligible to become a US citizen because he was not white.

From a contemporary vantage point, and from the perspective of Sartrean philosophy, we see the essentialism inherent in cultural racism as deeply incoherent. If there are essential differences of culture which make one race or nation different from another, then why couldn't these differences be undone and re-learned in a new culture? In which case it would make no sense to argue for the un-assimilability of Asians or any other culturally distinct group. Indeed, Thind and Ozawa both argued this very point before the Court. But the Court used the logic of essentialism, positing an *intangible*, and *inalienable* metaphysical core which could not be transcended, extirpated or lost.

Racial essentialism of this sort is anathema to existentialists. Sartre's most direct confrontation with racial essentialism came in the months directly following the liberation of Paris from the Nazis in 1944. His *Réflexions sur la question juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*; or *Reflections on the Jewish Question*) was a vicious condemnation, not of German racism, but of French racism. The Vichy regime was in many cases as or more virulently anti-Semitic than the German occupation. According to Sartre's psychological portrait the typical French anti-Semite believed that there was an essential, "metaphysical principle" driving Jews to act as Jews. No matter what they did, Jews were tainted. Jewish values always permeated the cultural products of Jews—paintings, sculptures, novels, plays, songs. Just as the Germans had turned against their own formerly celebrated poet Henrich Heine, the French had long been skeptical about the Frenchness of their own Jews. Bergson's intuitionism was just classic "Jewish rationalism" just as in Germany Herman Cohen's Kantianism had become a "Jewish" philosophy. *In Réflexions Sartre saw poignantly that essentialist thinking was at the core of French racism.* Because Sartre had devoted so much energy to exposing the fallacy of a static human nature in *Being and Nothingness* published in 1943, he was in a prime theoretical position to diagnose the anti-Semitism of his contemporaries. I believe his analysis sheds a great deal of light on the American problem of racism, and our tendency, just like that of the French, to assume that there are racial, cultural essences which are inescapable metaphysical forces within us that somehow, mysteriously, are beyond our power to alter.

Let us assume, for the moment, that there are such things as racial essences, whether biological or cultural. If these essences exist, then what does it mean to be *authentic* with respect to them? If there is an inherent metaphysical principle that a person cannot lose, and which causes our actions, then how could someone fail to be what he is? Seemingly, no person could

fail to be authentic, and the concept would be meaningless. As a critic of essentialism, I would indeed argue that authenticity based on racial essences is incoherent. But we should first look at a racial ideology could employ the concept, even if incoherently.

In its contemporary usage, authenticity almost universally has a positive connotation. But, if we consider the appeal to racial essences as a possible vocabulary of authenticity, then things are otherwise. On such a model, a person would be an *authentic* member of a racial group to the degree that s/he exhibited *characteristic, orthodox features* of members of that group, however those were defined by the particular taxonomy at hand. For instance, to be *genuinely, truly, really* or *fundamentally* (that is authentically) Asian by the US Supreme court in 1922 was not a term of praise. The court thought of itself as making objective, legal judgments about what categories a person fell into. To the degree that we can speak of authenticity in this context, it is the authenticity associated with essentialism. Authenticity would work like a zoological or botanical classification. Assume that we are uncertain about how to classify “Syrians” as most race theorists were in the 19C. Just as botanists recognize many variations within the same plant species, the racial theorist recognizes many differences among Syrians. Take skin color: many Syrians have lighter skin than Southern Europeans. If light skinned Syrians were used as the *essential type* for Syrians, then the group en masse would have a much stronger argument for classification under the racial category “white.” In this context “authentic” means *most representative* of the category as a whole. Which in turn means exhibiting the classical features or traits of the category. An inauthentic Jew, on this formulation, would be one who failed to exhibit the stereotypical racial features of *the Jew*. The essentialist conception of culturally authenticity, as exhibited in 19 and 20C racial ideologies, serves primarily a taxonomical

function; authenticity consists in exhibiting the traits necessary to fit within one category or another.

My contention in this section has been that the essentialist view of authenticity, as exhibited by cultural racism, ties the claim of genuineness to a rigid, conservative taxonomy of species types. Membership in the species (or group) is not voluntary, nor is there room for challenges to orthodoxy. Rather than being universally positive, the essentialist claim of authenticity may imply a set of socially stigmatized behaviors and traits. By contrast, the existential view of authenticity, in particular authenticity with respect to cultural identity, holds that the objective facts determining the limits of self-identification are social facts. The relevant social fact is the composition of the community to whom one appeals for recognition of one's self-identity. I wish to bring these issues into sharper focus by turning to the case of Jewish identity.

### 3. A Non-essentialist Approach to Jewish Identity?

One of the contemporary contexts where essentialist claims are common is the internal debate over Jewish identity. By *internal* I mean that the debate takes place almost exclusively among Jews. Within Judaism there are disagreements about the definition of who is a Jew. The orthodox movement, including the government of Israel, defines Judaism through matrilineal descent. If your mother is Jewish, you are Jewish. Reform Judaism expands the definition to those with one Jewish parent. Reconstructionists reject the notion that Jewish identity is determined by parentage, defining it more in terms of choice.

Before going further, I pause for some autobiography. I enter this debate a bit hesitantly, being neither a true insider nor a true outsider. Ethnically I am not Jewish, but my wife is. I do

not celebrate Easter or Christmas, but I do celebrate Passover, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashannah. We are raising our children as Jews. Which means they will go to Hebrew school and, in all likelihood, be bat or bar mitzvahed. I attend synagogue and have a good relationship with the local rabbi. Despite all this, I have not formally converted to Judaism and I am an atheist. My attachment to Judaism is rooted partially in an intellectual attraction to Judaism as a ethos, and partially in the practical concerns over how to raise a family.

So, culturally I am what one might call a *partial Jew*. The partiality of my Jewish identity comes not merely (or primarily, I think) from the fact that I haven't undergone a traditional religious conversion and made Aliya to Israel, but due to the fact that I will, most likely, never experience the *involuntary dimensions* of Jewish identity. I will not be "looked at" as Jewish by a hostile, alien culture. I do not have a typically Jewish last name, nor the stereotypical physical features of a Jew. I was not raised in a Jewish household. I can abandon whatever Jewish-ness I now claim when it becomes inconvenient or burdensome or, say, when I become bored with it. I will never be *racially* Jewish, nor *ethnically* Jewish, if by that we mean that my genetic ancestors were Jews. No current emersion in Jewish culture will change this. Skepticism about the depths and authenticity of my rather *voluntaristic* assumption of Jewish culture can be brought out by recalling Dickerson's comments about Obama: he lays claim to an identity that he hasn't earned. The same could be said of me—I am a faker because I wish to claim for myself a label that is misrepresentative. I am a bit like Dunwitty in Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* who thinks he's black because he listens to hip hop, has a black wife, and knows black history better than anyone.

But surely the weight of this charge of inauthenticity is mitigated by several factors. Not all Jews have Jewish last names, or stereotypical physical features, nor were they raised in

orthodox or even religious households. Imagine that I were to discover tomorrow, after some genealogical digging, that on my mothers side I was ancestrally Jewish, but this fact was hidden as a family secret. [This happens all the time, think of former secretary of state Madeline Albright.] Suddenly the charge of inauthenticity would lose force.

As an existentialist I maintain that cultural identities are fundamentally *chosen*, despite the non-voluntary, objective dimensions of culture—the social facts of recognition as I call them. Thus I would take issue with Dickerson’s claim that there is an essential cultural difference which makes Obama, whose ancestors weren’t slaves, non-black. I would also take issue with any conception of Jewish identity which assumes there is an inherent essence, passed down genetically, which defines Jewishness. I wish to be clear, that this is not the only, and not even the main feature of Orthodox Judaism, which is defined primarily in terms of its strict interpretation of Jewish oral and written law.

I also hesitate in criticizing orthodox Judaism for fear that I will be mistaken as saying that Orthodox Judaism is *racist* because it has a non-voluntaristic, non-pluralistic conception of Jewish identity. Orthodox Judaism is *not* racist. [Although critics of Israel make this charge all the time. The mistaken formula “Zionism = racism” is frequently evoked by anti-Israel activist. I strongly disagree with this formula.] The strongly ethnic conception of Jewish identity held by conservatives is based on the intention and need among Jews to *retain their (our) cultural identities for themselves (ourselves) and their (our) community*. The motive of 19C and 20C American racial ideology was to eliminate, exclude and exploit a category of people who were considered less than fully human. Conservative Jews do not consider goyim less than human; they have no communal desire to exploit non-Jews; and they do not make the chauvinistic claim typical of 19C European nationalism that their culture is superior to other cultures. For these

reasons, I must not be understood as claiming that orthodox Judaism, or that Zionism more generally, is racist.

I might, however, be guilty of overly “Christianizing” the notion of Jewish identity, or of turning a cultural identity into simply a religious identity. Christians are sometimes surprised that Jews have almost no interest in proselytizing. Under traditional law, rabbis are instructed to turn away converts three times. Merely wanting to adopt Jewish culture through one’s own personal style of life is not sufficient for being a Jew. By contrast, the Christian, especially protestant view of religiosity holds that *personal conviction* is sufficient for being an authentic Christian. Church membership is optional; the icing on the cake perhaps; what’s crucial is having personally accepted Jesus. Christianity has a more *voluntaristic* conception of identity.

The existential view I am defending says that there is a careful balancing act between voluntary and non-voluntary dimensions of self-identity. While our cultural identities are *fundamentally* voluntary, we don’t choose *everything*. The Christian who believes that he has a sufficient self-identity because of his personal relationship with God is missing something quite important: the look of other members of his community. He is in the same position as the aspiring young guitarist who in his heart-of-hearts believes himself to be a musician, but who never makes this identity public, explicit and objective. He fails to be recognized by others. No man is an island. No single person can radically change or create a new culture. Thus we are at the limits of the Christian view of cultural identity.

Against the charge that existentialism cannot account for the *weight* of cultural identities, for the very burdensome feeling of fate that accompanies these identities, I reply hesitantly. I am not certain that the existentialist has a satisfying reply to this worry. A person may be raised in a familial and cultural environment wherein the connection with one’s ancestors is omnipresent,

where remembrance and continuity with the past are everything, where the phrase “choosing one’s destiny” rings hollow. Perhaps Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen* illustrates the existentialist’s response to destiny. The novel centers on Danny Saunders’s *choice* to abandon his fate as the next rebbe of his father’s ultra-orthodox community. Potok softens the ethical lesson with a bit of a happy ending—Danny’s father forgives him for leaving the fold, asking that he remain “faithful to the commandments” even if not a member of the ultra-orthodox Chassidic community. But we still see the lessons of authenticity and recognition here: Danny will no longer be recognized by the ultra-orthodox community, he will not marry an ultra-orthodox woman, and he will not hold a position of authority in his father’s shul. Had Sartre or Camus written *The Chosen* we might have expected a more bitter ending—the father never accepting back the son, refusing to recognize him as a “Jew” once he had shaved his peyes and entered the secular world.

A further possible reply is to appeal to the *pluralism* of the existential model of cultural authenticity. If the content of cultural identities comes through the communities which confer recognition, then whether or not a particular cultural identity is construed more or less voluntaristically will depend on the self-understandings of that community. Existentialism need not answer the question: who is more authentically Jewish, a Chassidic Jew or a reform Jew? Existentialism eschews this question. What is relevant is whether there is a self-conscious, reflective, critical appropriate of one’s identity, which accepts the social facts of recognition. On this view, not all cultural identities need be understood as involving precisely the same level of voluntarism.

Ultimately, I think that the existential view of Jewish identity would closely resemble that of Israeli writer Amos Oz:

A Jew, in my vocabulary, is someone who regards himself as a Jew, or someone who is forced to be a Jew. A Jew is someone who acknowledges his Jewishness. If he acknowledges it publicly, he is a Jew by choice. If he acknowledges it only his inner self, he is a Jew by the force of his destiny. If he does not acknowledge any connection with the Jewish people either in public or in his tormented inner being he is not a Jew, even if religious law defined him as such because his mother is Jewish. A Jew, in my unhalakhic opinion, is someone who *chooses* to share the fate of other Jews, or who is *condemned* to do so.<sup>vi</sup>

I would add to Oz's description that the Jew who remains Jewish only "in his inner self" is, and most likely will feel, alienated from his social surroundings. To be a "Jew by the force of his destiny" is not the same as being a *faker*; rather, it is like being a bit too sheltered and introverted.

#### 4.Coda: Ethical Authenticity vs. Political Authenticity

I wish to conclude with a few remarks about the difference between authenticity on the ethical and the political level.

On the personal or *ethical* level, the existential notion of authenticity recommends that we abandon the concept of a unchangeable core to which we must own up, which defines who we are most fundamentally. But the existential notion of authenticity goes further: if we accept cultural identities, then we ought to be wary of thinking of ourselves as authentic only if we exhibit the stereotypical, orthodox or classical features ascribed to our culture. [Thus the danger of thinking black identity in the US is essentially about hip-hop culture, etc.] If we accidentally turn culture into a thing and not a process then we've made a classical error of essentialist thinking. Cultures are inherently developmental, changing and pluralistic. Thus to be *authentically Jewish* or *authentically black* or *authentically white* we need not presuppose a lost garden of Eden or even an ancient set of customs and rituals to which we must conform. The

content of our cultural identities is generated by the community of others with whom we share our practices. While the existential view may appear to dissolve the very notion of culture because of its emphasis on choice, this need not be the case. The voluntaristic dimension of culture is expressed when families decide how and when to celebrate holidays, how to educate their children, where to live, whether to speak a different language in the home, and so on. On the ethical level, what existential authenticity requires is that we tune into the balance between voluntary and non-voluntary dimensions of our cultural identities. Essentialist notions of identity over-emphasize the non-voluntary dimension. Existentialism offers a corrective.

On the *political level* the question of authenticity is how and when we are allowed to express our cultural identities *publicly*. The existentialist notion of authenticity is compatible with a wide variety of different political arrangements, as long as they would allow for a robust support of cultural rights. Authenticity would require at a minimum a diverse and well protected set of public institutions like schools, religious organizations, professional networks and labor unions. Imperial policies which restricted private language use, religious worship and public assembly would be quite incompatible with existential authenticity. But beyond these rather bare requirements, there are many different possible political models.

In the USA we have a robustly *multicultural society*, where state politics is officially divorced from particular religious or philosophical conceptions of well being. The space for multiculturalism is provided by the lack of a unifying *American* culture. So instead, we have a nation of hyphenated identities (African-American, Irish-American, Japanese-American, etc.) This is very different from French society, which like America is thoroughly secular, but which unlike America has a *national culture*. There is no space in France for hyphenated identities, and French society is generally hostile to American style multiculturalism. The third model would

be that of Israel, where the government is not neutral or secular, but expressed the cultural unity of a people or nation. I believe that the *ethical* notion of existential authenticity is compatible with each of these different political arrangements, since in each society there is the space for asserting cultural identities reflectively, self-consciously, voluntarily and without external coercion.

These remarks suggest that while existential authenticity is primarily an ethical idea which prescribes the cultivation of a particular lifestyle among individuals, there is also room for developing a set of social structures which are most coherent with this pursuit. It is an open question whether or not multiculturalism is the only or best political arrangement for fostering the existential virtue of authenticity.

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<sup>i</sup> Dickerson wrote the following: “‘Black,’ in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent (even those descended from West Indian slaves) are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and in politics. At a minimum, it can't be assumed that a Nigerian cabdriver and a third-generation Harlemit have more in common than the fact a cop won't bother to make the distinction. They're both 'black' as a matter of skin color and DNA, but only the Harlemit, for better or worse, is politically and culturally black, as we use the term. We know a great deal about black people. We know next to nothing about immigrants of African descent (woe be unto blacks when the latter groups find their voice and start saying all kinds of things we don't want said). That rank-and-file black voters might not bother to make this distinction as long as Obama acts black and does us proud makes them no less complicit in this shell game we're playing because everybody wins. (For all the hoopla over Obama, though, most blacks still support Sen. Clinton, with her long relationships in the community and the spillover from President Clinton's wide popularity.) To say that Obama isn't black is merely to say that, by virtue of his white American mom and his Kenyan dad who abandoned both him and America, he is an American of African immigrant extraction. It is also to point out the continuing significance of the slave experience to the white American psyche; it's not we who can't get over it. It's you. Lumping us all together (which blacks also do from sloppiness and ignorance, and as a way to dominate the race issue and to force immigrants of African descent to subordinate their preferences to ours) erases the significance of slavery and continuing racism while giving the appearance of progress. Though actually, it *is* a kind of progress. And that's why I break my silence: Obama, with his non-black ass, is doing us all a favor. Since he had no part in our racial history, he is free of it. And once he's opened the door to even an awkward embrace of candidates of color for the highest offices, the door will stay open. A side door, but an open door. Yet until Obama survives the scourging he's about to receive from Hillary Clinton (God help him if he really did lie about his Muslim background) and the electoral process, no candidate of color will ever be taken seriously. Clinton isn't about to leave the stage in the name of racial progress, and the pundit class has only just begun to take apart the senator's record, associates and bank accounts. Still, this *is* progress. A non-black on the down low about his non-blackness is about to get what blacks have always asked for: to be judged on his merits. So let's all just pretend that we've really overcome.” (“Colorblind” Jan 22, Salon.com; <http://www.salon.com/opinion/feature/2007/01/22/obama/>).

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<sup>ii</sup> Cultural essentialism was fueled by the concern to slow down or halt immigration, especially from Southern and Eastern Europe, China and Japan, and to a lesser extent, Mexico and Latin America. Federal legislation like The Immigration Act of 1924 did more than slow down immigration; it codified and defined the *racial, cultural* categories “white” and “non-white.”

<sup>iii</sup> See also Ray Takaki, *Iron Cages*.

<sup>iv</sup> Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

<sup>v</sup> *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923)

<sup>vi</sup> *Under This Blazing Light*, 80.