

To Be Both Black and American: African American Identity in the American Republic

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One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body[,] . . . this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. . . . This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folks*

Debates over critical race theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have, once again, shot the issue of race into a central position among the topics that polarize and divide Americans. It might seem to some onlookers that the current moment of discord is mainly the consequence of divisive ideologies that have recently infiltrated schools at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. Yet, such a perspective misses the uncomfortable reality that

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current debates over race reflect long-term differences in worldview. Prior to any national conversation in the United States about critical race theory and twenty-first-century DEI initiatives, a stark racial divide in attitudes over race existed in the United States. In brief, black Americans have maintained a racialized identity since the end of the civil rights movement, while white Americans from the same point in time have often not considered race a particularly salient feature of American social life.¹ Thus, it seems that what is most striking about the period between 1972 and 2024 is how *little* the racial divide has changed. To be sure, there have likely been shifts in public attitudes, but the fundamental racial divide in perceptions about American social life has continued to exist.

Some of these differences in perspective have been fostered by the development of a distinct African American identity and ethnicity within the American republic. Ethnicity is tied to history, especially familial memory and collective narratives of origins and community development. Differences in family and communal experiences, memory, and traditional narratives are apt to yield differences in values and political orientation. The pressing question, then, is how the political community should deal with differences in historical memory that are passed down across generations, reinterpreted, and presented as core features of a person's identity. This paper has three primary goals: (1) to make African American identity more legible to the wider republic, (2) to put forward a solution for dealing with ethnic differences in modern political communities more broadly, and (3) to explore the implications for civic education in America specifically.

Focusing on African American identity is important because it is core to American history: The group to which the name refers has persisted over time, does not exist separately from the American experience, has been connected to a number of national identity-defining conflicts within the country, and moreover sits apart from questions about the extent to which immigrants should assimilate; however questions about immigrant assimilation are answered, the African American minority will still be here and have a claim to occupying a somewhat unique position within the republic. Indeed,

the particular history of the United States and race has most prominently been about relations between white and black Americans.

This paper weaves together into a narrative of African American identity philosopher Jorge Gracia's work on race and ethnicity with W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on black America. It makes the argument that African Americans are a "racialized ethnos," in Gracia's terms, and provides a brief overview of some of the sources and the state of African American identity in the United States. Gracia's understanding of ethnicity relies heavily on the idea of family and historical relations, a conception that gives us leverage for thinking about ethnicity vis-à-vis the political community, for if ethnic groups are like large extended families, then there are reasons to think that multiple such families can exist in a political community together. The essay then considers a way for modern political communities to deal with the existence of various ethnic groups within a nonethnic polity. Specifically, it builds on Thomas Aquinas's concept of an order of love as theoretical grounding for how love for one's ethnic group may be ordered in a multiethnic society such that it does not threaten the superior love for one's political community. Two of Aquinas's concerns in his order of love are the family and the political community, so it is possible to extrapolate an understanding of an ethnic group as an extended family existing within a larger political community, helping to resolve Du Bois's struggle over the sense of "twoness" in the African American identity. The final section closes with the implications the preceding discussions have for civic education in the United States.

African American Identity

The aim of this section is to ground the concept of ethnicity in family and community memory and then ground African American identity in particular within this framework of ethnicity. I broach the topic aware that many intellectuals approach concepts like race, ethnicity, and culture with a fair amount of skepticism about their intelligibility, coherence, normative value, or reality beyond their existence as a social construct.² Here I am not interested in putting up an

adequate defense of the concepts' viability, though I will make frequent use of philosopher Jorge Gracia's work on the subject as grounding for my contention that the concepts of race and ethnicity offer enough substance to be useful as frameworks of analysis.

The Concepts of Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity might be slippery concepts, lines between them may be blurry at moments, and the terms might sometimes be hopelessly conflated both historically and in popular speech, but that does not mean that the terms are not reflective of some reality that can and should be investigated intellectually. Gracia's notion of ethnic groups as an extension of the family gives us great leverage, as we shall see, for thinking about how an ethnos relates to the larger political community, for we already have tools for thinking about the family in relation to the political community, even if such tools are contested.

Gracia claims to produce the first "extended and systematic philosophical discussion of race, ethnicity, and nationality by any one author in any one place," and he helpfully defends their coherence as concepts.³ His view of ethnicity is the primary focus here, though at least a brief note on race is also necessary. Gracia advances a genetic common-bundle view of race, the principle of unity of which is one of "a descent link and a set of perspicuous and genetically transmittable physical features."⁴ Key to this understanding is that relevant features are physical and genetically transmitted. Although members of a race might share in a pool of features, there need not be a single feature common to all. Thus, the set of features serves as a clear marker of a race, but not every member will display every feature.

Ethnicity, however, is not about physical features so much as history. Gracia, whose own conception of ethnicity is inspired by Du Bois's work, proposes that ethnic groups "belong to the larger kind of group we know as families," which include not only the nuclear and extended family but what he calls the "ethnic family." A family does not possess a single feature that every member shares in common with all others and that serves as its principle of

unity.⁵ To see why this is so, think of children adopted into a family: We say they are members of the family, even if they are not related to the rest by blood. Or consider those who marry into a family: One's aunt or uncle is often not a blood relation with oneself, nor are spouses blood relations with each other, and yet they are still part of the family. The principle of unity for a family is thus not genetic ties, and even a nuclear family does not possess this single feature in common. Rather, Gracia argues, the principle of unity for a family is the particular set of historical relations that tie them together, relations that produce a set of features, no one of which is necessarily shared by every member.⁶

Much like nuclear and extended families, ethnic families feature a set of historical relations that manifest as common features among some members of the group.⁷ In fact, Gracia calls his understanding of ethnicity the "familial-historical" understanding. In other words, what unites an ethnos is not any particular feature that every member shares but the "series of changing relations that tie the members throughout history and generate features common to at least some members of the group in particular contexts."⁸ Under this conception, culture may be a factor in ethnic unity, but it is not ethnicity per se. Ethnicity itself is "the relational property of belonging that characterizes the members of an [ethnic group]," and belonging is owed to a set of changing relationships that tie people together over time, while culture is, in a sense, a potential outcome of the process.⁹ The emphasis here is on shared historical ties that generate distinguishing features *understood in context*, features that are not necessarily physical but might include language, political organization, religion, culture, and much more.

In the American context, ethnic differences have often mapped onto a color line, but ethnicity is not fundamentally about race. Gracia claims that Du Bois had the right instinct when he discussed history and family; it is just that Du Bois mistakenly tied his intuitions to race rather than ethnicity.¹⁰ The shared relations and history that help generate some distinguishing properties that are understood in context is what allows us to call an ethnic group an ethnic group. For instance, African Americans may be part of a

black race that has certain recurring phenotypical and physical features, but they are also representatives of an ethnic group indigenous to the United States. While the ethnic group does intersect with the race and, indeed, it is impossible to discuss African Americans as an ethnic group without also discussing race, it is the ethnic component and the related issue of culture that provide additional layers of complexity to the situation of African Americans relative to the wider political community.

It Is Not About Critical Race Theory

Building on Jorge Gracia's conception of ethnicity, the main thrust of my argument is that African American identity is a culture built onto an ethnicity built onto a race, and this has implications for how African Americans relate to the larger political community.¹¹ In other words, a group of people who happened to be members of a particular race and representatives of somewhat similar, though still distinct, cultures underwent a historical process whereby they experienced similar phenomena and began to see themselves as one people. At the same time, their preexisting cultures merged and transformed into a new culture, one that also included the influences of the larger (nonblack) political community. This combination of a "racial ethnos" with a shared culture that is partially a product of and partially distinct from the wider culture of the United States introduces extraordinary complications into conversations about how African Americans relate to the larger American public, because at various points the relevant elements under discussion might technically be racial, ethnic, or cultural, and yet none of these elements can be fully disentangled from the larger bundle that is the African American community and its historical experience.¹² It is the existence of African Americans as an ethnic group, an existence that is neither wholly independent of race nor wholly reducible to culture, that gives substantial moral weight to its efforts to protect its ethnic identity within the American republic. The African American community did not start as an immigrant group, and it was not allowed to integrate fully into mainstream society for most of the history of the United States.

Thus, its particular history renders it somewhat detached from discussions of immigration or race more broadly. The problem of the African American community vis-à-vis American society is not only the problem of interracial relations, or even the problem of culture per se. To a significant extent, it is also the problem of a community that was told (and forced to be) separate for hundreds of years, thus nearly guaranteeing the development of an emotionally salient distinct identity and ultimately facilitating a strong moral claim to not being forced to assimilate into the wider culture to be respected as Americans.

The salience of African American identity is in part a result of its status, in a country of settlers and immigrants, of not originating as an immigrant group. The importance of the slave origins of the ethnic identity are relevant not simply for some kind of cause-and-effect explanation of contemporary economic disparities but as a narrative that explains the development of the ethnic group. Du Bois beautifully articulates this process of ethnic formation through the development of Negro spirituals, a form of music that is neither African nor European, but one that contains elements of both traditions brought together in a centuries-long process until it was fully Negro and fully American: "The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian."¹³ The development of Negro spirituals and African American gospel music can be used as a metaphor for the historical process that created the ethnic group. African American identity is intrinsically tied to American slavery, not because African Americans want to feel sorry for themselves, but because the crucible of slavery is one of the key links in the development of a distinct African American identity—thus emerges one of the most moving lines of Maya Angelou's famous poem "Still I Rise":

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

Focusing on the African American community as a distinct ethnic group, rather than purely focusing on the issue of race, helps clarify why a “black” Latino person might identify as Latino but not as black, why Somali immigrants might choose to move from Atlanta to Maine in part to distinguish themselves from the African Americans met in urban housing projects, and why an African American man might accuse a Tanzanian immigrant’s ancestors of slavery.¹⁴ It also helps clarify why even those African Americans who are less attached to certain elements of African American culture may still be attached to the history, tradition, and heritage itself—that is, they may identify, with much passion, as African American. Indeed, African Americans often call other black people brother and sister: “She is a ‘sista’” is code for “She is black,” for much like Gracia’s understanding of ethnicity, African Americans talk about themselves in historical and familial terms, even separate from the issue of culture that is so often closely associated with ethnicity.¹⁵

Nonetheless, culture is important in reinforcing ethnic identity. If the reader would permit a brief autobiographical digression, perhaps the cultural meaning of being a black American can be made more clear. It can be helpful to cite personal experience and anecdotes in discussing ethnicity and culture because they illustrate what is often difficult to specify in abstract terms. The African American community has an obvious tradition of autobiography, but as Nolan Bennett argues in *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy* (2019), autobiography has been core to the American tradition of political writing.¹⁶ In a paper that is part of a special edition on American Civics at 250, it seems especially fitting to leverage personal experience to advance the conversation on civic education in our multiethnic republic.

To begin, although I grew up in a majority-white suburb, being a black American formed a core part of my identity. Overwhelmingly, black churches provided the fertile ground of my own spiritual development as a child. It was not merely the church building; black gospel radio stations, black gospel award shows, black gospel TV shows, black preachers—these and more exposed me to a world

of Christianity that included precious few white people, not out of animosity, but just as a fact of practical experience. We sang the “Negro National Anthem” (a song I still love) periodically at church. But my experience goes beyond Christianity. I watched television shows with black stars and listened to music made by black people. I was aware of black magazines like *Ebony*, though I rarely, if ever, read them. Alongside fiction like *The Giver* and *Hatchet*, standard for Americans of my generation, I read books like *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* and *Roots*, sat in black barber shops while waiting for my father to get his hair done, and went only to black and Dominican shops to get my own hair done. That the black world was different from the white world was clear as day to me because I attended a majority-white school whose students often watched different TV shows, listened to different music, attended different churches, and frequently ate different food. As I aged, moved away from home, and spent increasing portions of my life away from black people, I experienced new features of American life: movies like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *The Sound of Music*, songs like “Country Road,” and food like casseroles. I attended majority-white churches and heard music from groups like Hillsong. And through all these experiences, though they enriched my life and broadened my understanding of the world, they never convinced me that my being African American was somehow irrelevant to my identity. In fact, in some ways my black identity was reinforced by my encounters with white Americans precisely because I could so frequently see differences in experience, perspective, and intuition.

Differences in music, food, and outward expressions of spirituality may seem superficial, and on some level they are, but on another level they are not. They form a set of common experiences that shape a person’s likes and dislikes and affect how much one may enjoy another person’s company. These differences are by no means bad. In fact, such differences make the rich tapestry of American life into something interesting and exciting—that is, if you allow them to. But the differences are nonetheless real, real enough that spending time with black Americans conveys for me a

certain sense of returning home, and real enough that any form of complete assimilation into a mainstream white American culture feels like a loss. This is the feeling that Du Bois so viscerally captures in *Souls of Black Folk*: "Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? . . . Is self-obliteration the highest end to which Negro blood dare aspire?"¹⁷

In sum, the cultural element of African American identity serves to reinforce historical ties, but the culture is not the essence of the identity. The relational process advanced by Gracia, which builds on Du Bois's intuitions, does not produce unanimity in thought, experience, or affinity; and though it does produce recurring cultural features, still, the ethnic identity is anchored by more than affinity with the culture. The culture of African Americans could probably change substantially without this essential familial-historical bond disappearing, and individual African Americans might depart from their culture in substantial ways without wanting to let go of the ethnic identity itself. If there be any reverence for tradition in the African American community, and there is, then that reverence for tradition points just as much in the direction of identifying with African Americans as a distinct ethnic group as it does identifying with America as the political community of allegiance. This point bears repeating: African American identity is primarily a product of tradition and not new political ideologies. As with any tradition, it can become politicized, but the political movements of the past few years have not created the fundamentals of black American identity, though many black Americans have come to filter their identity through the lenses of these political ideologies.

Moreover, the fact that African Americans are a *racial ethnos* also helps reinforce continued identification with the ethnic group in cases where the individual is not overtly culturally African American. The racial component means that black people will, practically speaking, still commonly have some of the same experiences regardless of other personal and cultural differences.¹⁸ The upshot is that there are actually many varied threads that hold

together and strengthen the salience of African American identity. This suggests that for the foreseeable future, Americans will not be able to escape conversations and debates about race, both in and of itself and as a proxy for ethnicity, and that race and ethnicity are likely to continue appearing as political issues under various guises.

Unity in Diversity

Du Bois's book *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924) helps clarify the particular and unique relationship between the American republic and the African American minority.¹⁹ He argues that American identity is essentially a conglomeration of different peoples, and that the "Negro" has had a particular influence on the development of America—indeed the "Negro" has been a "distinct asset" for the country, from labor and military defense to folklore and music and finally to its "peculiar spiritual role in America as a sort of living, breathing test of our ideals and an example of the faith, hope and tolerance of our religion."²⁰ The black American thus represents the faith of America: American prejudice has been constantly challenged by its faith, and faith itself proves the bedrock restraint on anger and retaliatory violence by the oppressed.

Inherited Memory and American Identity

The Gift of Black Folk traces black contributions to the Americas, beginning with the Age of Exploration, in its attempt to defend the thesis that the United States of America would not exist as such without its "Negro" population. But if this is so, merely teaching American history—and, for that matter, the history of the New World as a whole—always contains within itself the subtle seeds of a reinforcement of a black identity more broadly and an African American identity more particularly. So long as students in a classroom intuits some personal (though remote) connection to the black slaves brought to the New World, those students will form some sense of who their ancestors might have been and what that means for them today. And of course, further lessons about who they are come from their families and communities.

Familial and communal narratives of history shape one's understanding of America and one's place in it. American history is not just what is taught in a textbook—it is family memory and family experience. Thus, the stories told at home about the lives of one's parents and grandparents have a big impact on how one views the nature of one's country. Given that the generation that lived through segregation and the civil rights movement is still alive, a substantial portion of the African American community has likely grown up hearing negative stories about how their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles were treated by virtue of their skin color. They may also have formed the intuition, or maybe even the conviction, that their own and their parents' equality was recognized only as a result of the coercion of protest and civil disobedience, rather than by virtue of their humanity. African Americans as a whole negotiate their relationship to the broader American community from a different context than other Americans, for every statement about the meaning of the American experience is measured against the experience of their parents and ancestors, and many black Americans, at least implicitly, decide that their experience is sufficiently distinct that it is worth identifying with.

For many black Americans, the experience of blatant cultural differences combined with differences in history and a respect for ancestors makes it easy to then accept the idea that an American identity ought not erase or replace an African American identity. Thus, one finds provocative statements like that of Du Bois:

If . . . there is substantial agreement in laws, language and religion; if there is a satisfactory adjustment of economic life, then there is no reason why, in the same country and on the same street, two or three great national ideals might not thrive and develop, that men of different races might not strive together for their race ideals as well, perhaps even better, than in isolation. . . . We are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that, our Americanism does not go. At that point, we are Negroes.²¹

I suspect that Du Bois here might sound dangerously destabilizing to some Americans, while sounding eminently reasonable to many black Americans. What he is arguing, though, is the idea that maintaining distinct ethnic identities within the political community should not challenge allegiance to the modern state. Political allegiance and ethnic identity are, in a sense, operating on different planes.

While these attachments operate on different theoretical planes, practically speaking they are difficult to navigate. Whatever their race, chances are that individuals have accumulated enough personal experiences to reinforce their inherited narratives, making it difficult for them to interpret the world otherwise. This sort of natural difference in intuition among different groups in America can impede communication across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines and is partially the source of controversy over textbooks and how American history is taught in schools. History is always more than a set of facts; it is a story as well, so there is little way to teach American history without privileging one narrative or another. Nonetheless, these differences in historical memory and inherited narrative need not devolve into conflict that rips apart the fabric of the political community. These differences must, however, be navigated with care.

Order of Love

Debate over how best to deal with our diverse society has often taken place within the framework of two opposing poles, assimilation versus multiculturalism.²² Much of this debate surrounds issues like state neutrality versus state recognition. This paper is not concerned with the legal ramifications of multiethnic identity and more with the implications for national identity and the building of a healthy political community. For while a stable political community requires some level of shared values and culture, there is ample space for ethnic and cultural differences so long as one's loves are properly ordered. The approach here thus bears some resonance with both assimilationist and multicultural perspectives, but it is also more than a mere mean between these two perspectives. The emphasis is not so much on how alike or unlike one cultural group within the state is from

another, or on whether groups should have formal recognition from the state; it is, rather, on what distinguishes love for an ethnic group from love for a state, to what extent and in what contexts the loves compete, and how these loves should be prioritized in a person's life—in other words, the focus here is on the nature of the loves themselves and how their natures suggest an individual should navigate potential conflicts.

More extreme forms of assimilationist arguments push minority groups toward alienation and radicalization; at the same time, multicultural approaches that do not provide sufficient grounding in an American identity risk obscuring the fact that identity with the political community is of greater priority than identity with a particular ethnic group.²³ I agree with the Aristotelian tradition that political friendship is the appropriate grounding for thinking about citizenship and political identity.²⁴ Conversations about justice cannot proceed productively without this basic foundation of political friendship, which is why Aristotle sees political friendship as “more important than political justice.” And, importantly, political friendship requires disagreement accompanied by the retention of goodwill—citizens must be “different but concordant” in Trepanier's reading of Aristotle.²⁵

Inculcating political friendship requires many things, not least of which is a correct ordering of attachments. It would be ludicrous, for instance, for attachment to the baseball team I love to outstrip loyalty to my country. No matter how much I love my country, if the love for my preferred baseball team outstrips it, then there will always be problems in how I relate to fellow citizens. Part of seeking unity in diversity, then, is not just about possessing a shared national identity but about properly ordering our attachments such that we love things in the right way, to the right extent, and at the right time. But, merely thinking about ordering our loves as a simple rank-ordering schema of priorities is not sufficiently helpful, as any perceived conflict between the first-order and second-order priority would of necessity seem always to be resolved in favor of the first-order priority. In other words, I could never make the case for relaxing at a baseball game rather than working

overtime, since my job is an objectively higher priority than mere recreation.

To think about the proper ordering of loves, I turn to Thomas Aquinas's relatively extensive discussion of the topic in his *Summa Theologiae*.²⁶ His discussion is particularly helpful because he does not propose an overly simplistic rank-ordering schema by which to prioritize our loves. Rather, he proposes two axes to help us determine the degree of love—namely, love measured relative to its object and love measured relative to the lover—and he introduces the idea that there is a difference between loving he introduces the idea that there is itself a difference between loving something more *simply* and loving something more *relative* to a particular matter. Love measured relative to its object is concerned with whether the thing loved is itself better or higher than a different thing that is loved. Aquinas particularly attaches the idea of greater *reverence* to higher loves; thus more reverence is owed to one's parents than to one's spouse. Yet, the spouse is loved with greater *intensity*. This is because love may also be measured relative to the agent of love, the lover. While the object of love is about its species, love measured according to the agent is a measurement of nearness and likeness: How close is the subject of love to the lover? The closer the subject, the more intense the affection. Moreover, the closer the subject, the greater the variety and multiplicity of ways to love the person. And someone may be appropriately loved more relative to a particular matter, even though, strictly speaking, one does not love that person more than another.

These nuances map onto the ordinary intuitions with which people navigate life. The willingness of some parents to serve as soldiers, police officers, or firefighters is at least partly legible as the actions of a father who loves his children with great intensity and yet sees serving his country or local community as a higher calling, but one that does not erase the intensity of his love for his children. As regards the love given to his political community, it is in some sense a higher (and thus more transcendent) love than that given to his child insofar as it encompasses many more people. But the love given to his child is characterized by a

greater intensity and affection, and moreover it displays itself in a wider range of matters and settings than that given to the political community. Or, by way of a more mundane example, a person might “love” her boss more than her parents relative to certain work-related matters, such that she obeys her boss rather than her parents in fulfilling her duties at work. But, strictly speaking, she has greater love for her parents *simply*.

We can map these ideas onto the discussion of African American identity if we think of ethnic groups as extensions of family, as in the view advanced in this paper, and can then apply Aquinas’s insights to ethnic communities.²⁷ One should love the political community as a higher common good than one’s ethnic group, as the political community nourishes us in a more foundational and diffuse way than an ethnic group does on its own. At the same time, ethnic communities do nourish us in particular ways, and they are often subjectively nearer to a person than other citizens, as values, expressions, and traditions are given to us through ethnic groups, and these groups nourish our imaginations and sense of identity. As Susan Selner-Wright has noted, Aquinas maintains “that our ‘union’ with our kindred is more subjectively profound than our unity with others.”²⁸ Union with other African Americans might be more “subjectively profound” for many African Americans than unity across ethnic groups, which might manifest in a particular intensity in intra-ethnic relationships. That said, the intensity or subjective profoundness of love that black Americans may experience toward their ethnic group is not a measure of the objective worth of that love—it is a measure of the subjective nearness of the beloved to the agent, not a measure of the object’s value. Intra-ethnic love is a lower kind of love than love for one’s political community, even if a co-ethnic may be loved with more intensity than other citizens qua citizen. While the ethnic group might provoke greater intensity in love, the political community is worthier of a greater reverence in love as a more fundamental sustainer of both common and individual life, even if it does so at a distance further removed from the individual than the ethnic community.

The error many people commit is in thinking that because their subjective experience of intra-group affection is more intense, this then maps onto the value of the object of love in ways that it does not. Thus, one finds more radical pro-black perspectives that devalue or reject other ethnic groups. Others commit the error of thinking that because some people love their ethnic group with great affection, this inherently means that they must loosen those bonds of affection to love the political community properly. Thus, one finds more radical pro-color blindness perspectives that would erase nearly any discussion of race or ethnicity as a facet of contemporary America. In both cases, intensity has become the only measure with which to evaluate love. Aquinas's order of love skirts the opposing extremes of obliterating lesser loves, on the one hand, and of not properly ordering various loves, on the other. It also helps mitigate the psychological distress that arises when people perceive choices between loves in strictly either/or terms. As Selner-Wright notes of Aquinas's discussion of the love a man has for both his father and his son, by establishing the legitimate claims of both, Aquinas highlights why it is that choosing between them would produce a terrible conflict. The answer is not to eradicate a legitimate claim on one's affection but to keep one's affections in proper order. Doing so, though, requires appropriate moral and intellectual formation.

Civic Education

The things that reinforce African American identity are both so constitutive of America and so reflective of basic human longings for ancestry, meaning, and tradition that civics lessons are likely to run up against a host of passions and tensions in the course of teaching about American history and national identity. One way for American history and civics teachers to respond to this reality is to subtly infuse lessons with the logic of an order of love. Rather than public education either ignoring or intentionally reinforcing particular ethnic identities, even ones as constitutively related to America as African American identity, educators ought to attempt to harmonize various perspectives on the American experience through

intentionally presenting different sorts of Americans who value different sides of their identity and yet nonetheless remain committed to the idea that America is a nation worthy of their respect and love. America should be presented as an entity that admits of diversity and adaptability, on the one hand, and of unity and inheritance, on the other.

Civic education can play a constructive role in fostering the kind of ordered love that breeds civic unity rather than division. Some secular and American version of the argument might, of course, be explicitly taught to students as they are being educated. But more than being explicitly taught the concept, children need to be assisted in developing an instinct for ordering their attachments, relating their ethnic and particular cultural identities to the larger republic, and respecting the different backgrounds of others. One of the best methods for doing so is through the reading of literature and autobiography. In fact, good literature is probably more helpful for developing an instinct for an ordered love than a lesson on moral philosophy. If exposed to books in which characters must deal with tensions and agonizing decisions involving country, kinfolk, and identity, students learn nuanced decision-making in a way that becomes a part of the basic fabric of how they think about life in a political community. Moreover, though nowadays people often like to talk about the value of fiction as providing a “mirror” for the child, the more pressing civic value of narrative works is that they open up a child’s imagination to thoughts and experiences different from their own—they provide intuitions for perspectives that cannot be easily accessed by the child without assistance.²⁹ Given the diversity of our polity, this is an especially key need. Students will need to interact with people of various racial and ethnic groups throughout their lives, so it is entirely appropriate that schools be intentional about including contributions from writers representing different American subcultures in school curricula.³⁰ The point is not so much representation but the possibility that it will become harder for students-turned-adults to identify with and to listen and talk to people of other racial and cultural groups if they have not been used to interfacing with

members of these groups as children, albeit through literature. Thus, literary and autobiographical works can foster both a proper order of love and empathy for the perspectives of others.³¹

Instead of either fighting a losing battle against or ignoring subnational ethnic cultures and identities, civics education might focus on showing how cultural differences are compatible with a single political allegiance. To do so, educators should develop an understanding of the relevant groups in American society, particularly their histories and values, in order to make the case for political allegiance in terms that resonate with various subcultures.³² Importantly, this does not mean that educators should teach culturally contextualized political allegiance in the form “X group should be patriotic for XYZ reasons”; rather, educators should be aware of a variety of ways that different groups and traditions within the United States have expressed their support for the American political project, and they should be able to articulate those arguments whether or not they explicitly attach them to a specific group or tradition. The point is that allegiance to the American political project should be framed in terms that resonate with lessons about life, society, and morality that students learn from family and friends, and not only in terms that resonate with the teacher’s particular background.³³ In fact, I would argue that attempts to communicate a common American political identity that do not resonate with or relate to the more immediate and visceral experiences of students are doomed to make the American political project feel like a fiction or an imposition. Connecting the common political community to the variety of subjective experiences and traditions within American society, then, is crucial.

This is not to suggest that public schools need intentionally reinforce particular ethnic or cultural identities. What I am saying is that they should (1) not present themselves as obstacles to parents who do teach their children to have those identities, (2) be concerned with how best to channel those identities into a coherent and unified national identity, and (3) be nudging students in the direction of figuring out how to responsibly order their various loves and identities while respecting the backgrounds of others.³⁴

The point of any discussion of an ethnic or cultural group that arises in a class should be at the service of channeling that identity into a larger narrative of national identity and not for the sake of placing students of that group into a box separate from everyone else. Private schools (and to a certain extent charter schools) have more leeway here. Given that parents elect to send their children to those schools, as institutions they have more space to reinforce particular identities in ways that both solidify the parents' teaching and explicitly connect those teachings to a common American narrative.

Conclusion

Jorge Gracia's account of ethnicity is lucid and helpful—helpful not only because of its lucidity, but because it is grounded in another concept for which we already have much sustained reflection—namely, the family. Building on Gracia's account, itself partially inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois's reflections on being a black person in America, I argue that the underpinnings of African American identity are not merely cultural affinity or an aberration driven by our current political moment, but rather are long-standing patterns of relations that matter not only for the African American community but for the republic as a whole. These relations have been knitted together through shared historical experiences that have been passed down through generations as narratives that constitute the African American identity; they constitute a particular understanding of who one's ancestors are, what they experienced, and how that history adds meaning to and shapes one's life. These historical ties have been reinforced through cultural markers that continually renew these bonds and a sense of a shared identity.

For such a strong sense of ethnic identity not to inhibit civic friendship, we need tools for determining how to order our loves and attachments properly. Aquinas's "order of charity," though somewhat secularized here, provides us with some leverage for this task, as the order detaches the intensity of a love (primarily a reflection of closeness) from the species and superiority of that love (primarily in relation to God, though I argue it can also be pegged to the common

good), allowing for richness and nuance in how people relate to their ethnic and political communities. The intensity of an ethnic identity does not intrinsically have to interfere with the greater reverence owed to the political community, and thus Du Bois's sense that there is a twoness in the African American identity and his intuition that this twoness is actually a good thing seems, if we adopt the Thomistic framework, to be correct on both counts.

This interpretation offers implications for civic educators who want to make the case for American national identity in ways that are not unintentionally flat, or even alienating, for students. Beyond emphasizing fiction and autobiography as a way to build an instinct for ordered love, civic educators themselves should strive to assist students in weaving their family narratives into a wider tapestry of American identity that can also include the potentially different narratives of others they encounter. The better that teachers themselves have a grasp of different cultural traditions within America, the better and more naturally they can communicate such an ordered love and a unity in diversity to their students.

Notes

1. Survey results from 1972, a mere four years after the close of the civil rights movement, found (a) identification with one's racial group among black people to be much more widespread than among white people; (b) black people tended to be more collectively oriented than white people; and (c) black people were much more likely than white people to see racial disparities as a product of the social system, whereas white people were much more likely to see such disparities as products of personal deficiencies in black people. Patricia Gurin, Arthur H. Miller, and Gerald Gurin, "Stratum Identification and Consciousness," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1980): 30-47, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3033746>.

If we fast-forward to 2009, although interviewees cited freedom as the value that unites Americans, racial differences characterized these responses. White interviewees were more likely to think that race is a problem because the public was obsessed with talking about it, whereas nonwhite interviewees were more likely to talk about racism as an ongoing problem. Black interviewees specifically did not want to support "traditional" values that they thought perpetuated racial inequality. The authors sum up their findings as racial groups talking past each other

- “as they refer to different value orientations to address issues of national unity” (1). Douglas George and George Yancey, “Forming a More Perfect Union: Racial Perceptions of Unity and Division in the United States,” *Sociological Focus* 42, no.1 (2009): 1–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41441757>.
2. See, e.g., Kimberly Cardenas, Heather Silber Mohamed, and Melissa R. Michelson, “The Political Consequences of Racialized Ethnic Identities,” *Political Research Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2023): 1857–71; Davora Yanow, *Constructing Race and Ethnicity in America: Category-Making in Public Policy and Administration* (Routledge, 2003); Bob Carter, *Realism and Racism: Concepts of Race in Sociological Research* (Routledge, 2000), <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.utk.idm.oclc.org/books/mono/10.4324/9780203130773/realism-racism-bob-carter>; Naomi Zack, “Race and Philosophic Meaning,” in *Race/Sex: Their Sameness, Difference and Interplay*, ed. Naomi Zack (Routledge, 1997), 29–44, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.utk.idm.oclc.org/books/edit/10.4324/9780203760604/race-sex-naomi-zack>; Phyllis Pease Chock, “Culturalism: Pluralism, Culture, and Race in the *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*,” *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 1, no. 4 (1995): 301–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.1995.9962513>; Anthony Appiah, “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 21–37, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343460>.
 3. Jorge Gracia, *Surviving Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), xxii.
 4. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 104.
 5. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 46–47.
 6. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 48.
 7. These sets of distinguishing features thus reflect distributions, or, in Rogers Brubaker’s terms, they represent a particular “mode of heterogeneity.” Rogers Brubaker, “The Return of Assimilation? Changing Perspectives on Immigration and Its Sequels in France, Germany, and the United States,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24, no. 4 (2001): 531–48.
 8. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 49.
 9. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 50–51, 54.
 10. Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 52.
 11. Of course, I am not the first to demarcate African Americans as an ethnic group.
 12. Gracia speaks of racial or racialized ethnos. See Gracia, *Surviving Race*, 149.

13. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (editors), 1999, W.W. Norton and Company, <https://www.norton.com/books/9780393973938/about-the-book/product-details>
14. The black Latino example comes from Gracia, *Surviving Race*, xii; the Somalian immigrant example comes from Catherine Besteman, *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine* (Duke University Press, 2016), 108; the Tanzanian woman is an acquaintance of mine, and the anecdote came from a conversation with her.
15. “Look how far we’ve come,” said my grandmother to me recently after describing the poverty of her youth. When I later pressed her on who “we” are, she replied that she supposed she meant black people. Implicit in her words is an understanding of a relevant “we” moving through history. Black Americans are often used to hearing the words “we” and subconsciously understanding it to mean black people. This is so ingrained in me, a woman who has spent her entire life educated in predominantly white institutions, that when I think of the phrase “my people,” it often most naturally and viscerally to me means fellow black Americans. “We” have indeed come very far.
16. Nolan Bennett, *The Claims of Experience: Autobiography and American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
17. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 180–81.
18. This also helps explain a certain affinity between Caribbean and African immigrants with African Americans, even though tensions and differences exist as well.
19. Du Bois argues that the “Negro is the central thread of American history.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk* (Project Gutenberg, 2021), 135, <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/66398>. One can forgive his use of the singular and still acknowledge that African Americans are at least one of the central threads of American history.
20. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*, i.
21. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 181.
22. See, e.g., Will Kymlicka, “The Rise and Fall of Multiculturalism? New Debates on Inclusion and Accommodation in Diverse Societies,” *International Social Science Journal* 61, no. 199 (2010): 97–112, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2451.2010.01750.x>; Christian Joppke, “The Retreat of Multiculturalism in the Liberal State: Theory and Policy,” *British Journal of Sociology* 55, no. 2 (2004): 237–57; Brubaker, “Return of Assimilation.”

There are also parallels to discussions about “race-based political solidarity” in Tommie Shelby, “Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression,” *Ethics* 112, no. 2 (2002): 231–66; and Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Harvard University Press, 2005). Also see Cardenas, “Political Consequences,” for discussion about the consequences of racialized identities on political action.

23. These are not dissimilar to Trepanier’s critiques of the two perspectives in Lee Trepanier, “Aristotelian Citizenship for a Multicultural World,” in *Citizenship and Multiculturalism in Western Liberal Democracies*, ed. David Edward Tabachnick and Leah Bradshaw (Lexington Books, 2017).
24. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert Bartlett and Susan Collins (University of Chicago Press, 2011); Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New Advent, 2017), <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/>; Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004); Trepanier, “Aristotelian Citizenship.”
25. Trepanier, “Aristotelian Citizenship,” 4–7.
26. Properly speaking, Aquinas discusses an order of charity. Charity is a Christian virtue, but I think his order of charity can in some sense be applied to natural love without explicitly discussing God and the accompanying theological virtue, though the application is imperfect without the theological discussion. Although I am drawing on the *Summa* here, Aquinas also discusses the order of charity in the *De Caritate*.
27. Jesse Russell has also recently argued that Aquinas’s thought helps resolve the tension between “reactionary ethnocentrism and radical multiculturalism,” though he is specifically focused on how Catholics should engage with the broader world on these issues. Like me, he reads ethnic groups as a proper extension of Aquinas’s discussion of kinship and nearness, and his understanding of Aquinas on this topic informs my own. Jesse Russell, “Aquinas on Kinship and *Caritas*,” *New Blackfriars* 103, no. 1107 (2022): 622–39.
28. Susan C. Selner-Wright, “The Order of Charity in Thomas Aquinas,” *Philosophy and Theology* 9, no. 1 (1995): 22.
29. This is perhaps part of the impetus for and value of autobiography in the black political tradition, for when the experience of one’s family and community is not easily intuited by the larger public, one defaults to autobiographical narrative as a tool to explain the community’s intuitions, feelings, and perceptions.

30. This is not dissimilar to language used in the recent report “Educating for American Democracy”: “At all grade levels and in all topics, history and civics must be taught in ways that incorporate a wide range of perspectives and interests into shared understanding, coherent even where it is complex, and grounded in appreciation for America’s ideals of liberty, equality, and rule of law” (28). Educating for American Democracy (EAD), “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners,” *iCivics*, March 2, 2021, 28. The authors recognize, too, the importance of students learning to engage with the perspectives and values of others as core to civic participation; and rather than trying to name and count the number of times a specific group is included in a curriculum, they advocate for diversity and unity being general commitments that flow through an entire curriculum.
31. I have a few recommendations that, I think, should not be overly controversial in terms of content. For younger students, I loved reading Mildred D. Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, and *The Road to Memphis* as a child, and I also recall enjoying *Esperanza Rising* and *Child of the Owl*, though all of these deal with difficult themes and require some discernment about when to introduce them to students. *Little Women* is a classic that all American girls should read or have read to them at least once in life. For older students, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *My Antonia*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *A Raisin in the Sun* all seem to be good choices. For autobiographies, Frederick Douglass’s and Benjamin Franklin’s autobiographies should top the list of important autobiographies to read. Ben Carson’s *Gifted Hands* is a good candidate for a contemporary inspiring biography that will also touch on the crucial issue of inner-city life in modern America. There are other books that are very important for the American experience, of course, but many are also frequently challenged in school curricula.
32. If teachers expose themselves to a wide variety of American experience through books and movies, then adjusting to the perspectives and language of the students they encounter in the classroom will be natural rather than forced. In fact, the natural adjustment that comes through long-term familiarity with and affinity for different American subcultures is *much* preferable to the kind of forced identification with someone of another background that occurs when people try to relate to someone of a different background on the basis of articles they have read or documentaries they have watched.

33. This matters especially because public school teachers are less diverse than their students. In the 2020–21 school year, 80 percent of public school teachers identified as non-Hispanic white persons and 77 percent are women. See Katherine Schaeffer, “Key Facts About Public School Teachers in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, September 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/09/24/key-facts-about-public-school-teachers-in-the-u-s/>.
34. Although this paper has said little about parents, I do want to emphasize that parents and home communities are a major reason why ethnic and cultural identities persist over time. Public schools that even implicitly preach a vision of American identity that comes across as fundamentally incompatible with a particular racial and ethnic identity are placing children in a position where they have to choose between their teacher and their parent. Sometimes this situation is unavoidable, but this tension should be minimized to the extent possible. This is particularly important to remember relative to the African American experience, since the fundamentals of that identity are so tied to key events in American history and thus easily reinforced by the teaching of that history.