

Interviewing An Older Caribbean-American Man on Identity in America

India V. Greenidge

Miami University Regionals

CRE 151

Dr. Loren Coleman

October 14, 2021

Interviewing An Older Caribbean-American Man on Identity in America

The United States of America is known historically and prides itself on its mixture of cultures. It is one of the many countries to which people from developing countries come in order to find a better life. After coming here, however, many of them find that their experiences are not as interculturally harmonious as they had hoped. In fact, some find that, no matter how well they assimilate otherwise, they may be placed in a position to bear resentment toward their differences rather than take pride in them.

I interviewed an older Black male by the name of Wallace Greenidge from the Caribbean island of Barbados. During the interview, I asked him how his identity as both a Black man and as an immigrant have shaped his experiences in the United States as well as his perception of himself. As mentioned previously, many people who identify with other cultures in this country tow the line between their heritage and the society into which they enter. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Jamaican-born Stuart Hall explicitly mentions this disparity particularly as it relates to people from the Caribbean. Hall states that, “Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with this African presence” (Hall 2019). The Caribbean itself can be considered its own cultural melting pot, as many people who move there assimilate easily into the atmosphere without losing their original cultural identity. As a result, there are people who are ethnically Asian living there who identify with whatever island on which they live and have adopted their accents. However, this is not enforced, and most Caribbean nations are happy to include these people as their own just as easily as they include children born outside the country to parents from the islands. When Wallace came to America, he did not find this overall welcoming atmosphere that is present in the Caribbean. Rather, he found that both his color and his culture played a negative role in a number of events that he says

have impacted how he perceives the intersection of race and culture in the United States (personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Just as “America” has become erroneously attributed to only the United States of America, so, too, did the image of the White American become the face of what is defined as “American.” And often one of the questions that are posed to people who do not fit this conventional criterium of “American” tends to be “Where are you from?” sometimes followed by “Where are you *really* from?” In their video on Asian Americans, one of the SoulPancake’s interviewees talks about when they were asked this question. In Wallace’s case, the questions were more intrusive and insulting. The island of Barbados is a well-known tourist destination and is one of the richest islands in the Caribbean. However, Wallace recalls being asked what kinds of houses in which Barbadian people live. The assumptions given were that they live in “dirt houses” or “mud houses.” Among these assumptions was the idea that, due to the island’s size, every person on the island knew everyone else on the island as well. “They really need to travel and figure out how other people live,” Wallace says. Surprisingly, this did not have an effect on his self-esteem. Wallace does not see himself as “below” these people and refuses to let them make him feel that way. He claims that whether or not they understand the history of his country or how the people live is none of his concern, and that he is not the one who has to live with the ignorance that those who ask these types of questions carry. However, he contests those other experiences have caused him to become wary of racial interactions in America. In her essay “Malaysian for a Week,” Sara Tyson expressed a similar instance as an African American dealing with British-infused Malaysian beauty standards as the local questioned the appearance of her hair and went so far as to stuff pencils in it or untie her bun. “In their attempts to praise my

hair,” she writes, “it still made me so self-conscious. Who knew, that the hair on your head, something you were born with, could dictate how others treat you?” (Tyson 2016).

The concept of what is “American” may also impact how others who do not see themselves as American look at those who also do not fit that narrative. One can equate these struggles and their negative impact to how African kings contributed to the slave trade by not viewing their fellow Africans as fellow Africans in the face of traders, but rather allowing these traders to view them as chattel, therefore allowing for a snowball effect that would end up leading to the proliferation of the slave trade and the diaspora (Hazard 2014). Wallace shared a story of going to a shop in Brooklyn, New York to purchase a gold chain. He entered the shop and asked to see a quality herringbone chain. The cashier, an Indian man, returned with a chain that appeared to low quality which Wallace described as akin to costume jewelry. Afterwards, a white couple came in and asked to see to see similar jewelry. The cashier at this time chose to show them a chain that appeared to be of a much higher quality. Angered, Wallace went to another shop owned by another Indian man. This man came over and helped to rectify the problem, but of course by that time the damage had been done. Wallace says that the event discouraged him somewhat when it came to his perception of himself as an individual in America. In New York City, appearances are important. The appearance of power and authority is crucial to one’s success in the city, and even something as seemingly unimportant as cheap-looking jewelry could completely damage one’s impressions on others. At the time, Wallace was not dressed in any manner that should have implied that he was looking for costume jewelry or would not have been able to pay: he was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, which is standard fare for many who are just walking by. However, this individual picked something about Wallace to associate with poverty and chose to stick to it so closely that he was not willing to even consider

that this customer really wanted to see a good chain. Considering that the White couple dressed in similar clothing, we can surmise that what the cashier saw and judged was a combination of Wallace's skin color and accent.

We often see that people of color are placed in positions of disadvantage due to misconceptions. In their book *The Matrix of Race*, Coates, Ferber, and Brunsma talk about how this discrepancy plays a role in the dehumanization of people of color. This unequal distribution of rewards and privileges, they argue, "has produced and reproduced social hierarchies that reflect our racial categorizations" (Coates et. al 2018). For the cashier, Wallace's skin color and accent were markers of "other" in the system that has a default face and mannerism for "American."

So, what happens to these "others" when they are faced with this exclusion from society? Some, like the Eastern Europeans living in post-Brexit Britain, push harder to be included in their society (BBC Newsnight 2016), offering the plea that they have come to work and live like anyone else. Some shun this "other" identity altogether, as Elizabeth Acevedo demonstrates when she explains her childhood in her poem "Afro-Latina" when she says, "My parents' tongue was a gift which I quickly forgot after realizing my peers did not understand it" (SlamFind, 2015, 0:22). Others may double-down on this identity, locking it within their own community out of fear of its being eradicated. For example, the concept of blood quantum within Native American communities. For Native Americans, this concept utilizes a "language of survival" (Chow, 2018, 8:39), a means of preserving the community.

When asked about how his experiences have impacted his perception of himself in relation to his identity as both Barbadian and American and overall, as a Black man in America, Wallace draws on the remembrance that the members of the diaspora expand to the Caribbean as

well. He juxtaposes his identity as Black with his age and his status as an immigrant as “three strikes that people hold over your head” (personal communication, October 8, 2021). As identities overlap with one another, the issues that work against them add up as well. He expresses that he does not see himself as a victim of any of his situations. Instead, he has used it to bolster his confidence in his identity. However, his perspective from that vantage point allows him to be in a prime position to help and educate others. He does not consider himself a victim of racism even though he acknowledges that that might be so; he makes the conscious choice to remove himself from or resist the possibility of putting himself in positions in which he might be seen or treated negatively for these perceptions. In writing “The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnic: The New Political Force of the Seventies,” Michael Novak puts the emphasis on our responsibility to diversity when he states that “our conception of what American is, and what political action ought to be, might well be revolutionized if we take seriously our cultural pluralism” (Novak 1971). Wallace is one example of the many who fall into the category of “other” and use it to create their own definition of “American”—or, in the case of Eastern Europeans in Britain, “British”—a definition which includes them and their culture and emphasizes what they bring to the pot in their own way rather than remain outside the category of the dominant culture.

Since race had been installed as a determinant of privilege, status, and power in the world in many places, it makes sense that we are no longer in a place in history at which we can say that it is irrelevant to the human experience. In fact, since it sits at the center of many of our systems, it might be a long time before it is ever seen as irrelevant. As Hall puts it, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall 2019). While it remains a viable definition, people do not

deserve to be treated as “less than” for it. We are all the products of the experiences that our ancestors went through, and our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and so on will be the same for us. These are useful and valuable experiences that no one should be forced to relinquish in order for anyone else to retain some semblance of supremacy.

References

- BBC Newsnight. (2016, August 2). *Life for Eastern Europeans in post-Brexit Britain – BBC Newsnight* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmQ5vzaJWXc>
- Chow, Kat. (2018, February 9). *So What Exactly Is 'Blood Quantum'?* [Video]. TED Conferences. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2018/02/09/583987261/so-what-exactly-is-blood-quantum>
- Coates, R. D., Brunσμα, D. L., & Ferber, A. L. (2018). *The matrix of race: Social construction, intersectionality, and inequality*.
- Hall, Stuart. (2020). *Cultural identity and diaspora* (pp. 231-242). Routledge.
- Hazard, Anthony. (2014). *The Atlantic slave trade: What too few textbooks told you – Anthony Hazard* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NXC4Q_4JVg&t=109s
- Novak, Michael. (1971). *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: The New Political Force of the Seventies*.
- SlamFind. (2015, September 21). *Elizabeth Acevedo - "Afro-Latina"* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPx8cSGW4k8>
- Tyson, Sara. (2016). *Malaysian for a Week*.