

Kierrah Byrd

DES 470

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## For Us To Be Us: How Identity is Formed for Black Women

### **Overview**

A few months ago, I had a discussion with a good friend about identity. We spoke about the feeling of discouragement when reflecting on identity and our careers and passions. We proposed that maybe this inherent disheartenment was from the lack of personal identity. She explained how she agreed, as she has not yet solidified her identity either -- this manifesting through changing her major several times -- she offered up the idea that maybe we have not solidified our own identities because of our childhoods, and furthermore that the Black community has fostered our growth dissimilar to our non-black peers. Her proposed analysis created my thesis. The aim of this thesis is to explore the facets in which Black women form identities in Black communities.

When speaking about the formation of identity for Black women in Black communities, it's especially important to look at adolescence, context and the inherent societal pressures of constant oppression based on race and gender identity. Because of this, this topic will be examined through the lens of adolescent development and the popular W.E.B Du Bois concept of Double Consciousness. We will find that the formation of identity for Black women in Black communities is dependent on adolescent development and Double Consciousness Theory, which explains the idea of racism affecting the portrayal of identity for Black people. This theory will

be re-appropriated through the newer concept of the Triple Consciousness Theory and the Culture of Dissemblance coined by Darlene Clark Hine.

Through primary research, I have found that the most effective form of overcoming displacement of identity is to talk about identity and learn from others about their journey. Not understanding or having an identity can be isolating, and because of this, knowing you are not alone is an important project goal. The proposed project is an event series that occurs monthly for Black women that is accompanied by a publication and an online podcast.

### **Research Summary**

#### *Adolescence, Double (Triple) Consciousness Theory, and Culture of Dissemblance*

In Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's 20th Anniversary edition of the classic book *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria* she explores ideas of identity formation. She recalls the popular identity formation theory of the "looking-glass self" coined by Charles Horton Cooley in 1902, in which she explains it simply, "Other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves" (Tatum, 2017, pg. 99). While the "looking-glass self" is a complex theory, it is the idea that we form our personal perception of ourselves based on outside sources within the world. As Tatum points out, this is triggered by the questions, "Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in cultural images around me?" (Tatum, 2017, pg. 99). These guiding questions allow one to self-reflect through the mirror of someone else's eyes. When these questions contradict how one may see themselves, this creates an 'identity crisis' for individuals. Individuals start to often-times negatively judge themselves based on the contradicting

information about them in the world. While this theory is evident for everyone in every social, cultural, and ethnic group, double consciousness theory applies the concept of the looking-glass self towards Black people. W.E.B Du Bois coined the phrase Double Consciousness in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, this theory explains the struggles Black individuals experience in an oppressive society. He explains his theory in an interview by *The Atlantic* magazine in 1897, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” (Pittman, 2016). The looking-glass self is more complex for Black people because in a racist world, they must create an identity that defies a racist mirror.

Likewise, Melissa Harris-Perry, an African American writer who focuses their work on African-American politics, explains that Black women are historically the most undermined group of people, “They are political because Black women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 5). Black women have an even more difficult experience forming identities because of the outward world’s belief system about Black women. This experience that Black women face has even been argued that it should be its own theory itself apart from double consciousness. This has birthed the reappropriated term, Triple Consciousness Theory which, “Argues that black women view themselves through three lenses and not two: America, blackness, and womanhood” (Welang, 2018, pg. 296). While double consciousness would seem like an inclusive term, many argue that W.E.B Du Bois’ description of the term is problematic because it deliberately excludes Black women, and once again discusses them as the “other.” While double

consciousness applies to Black women, Black women have had to secretly deal with the pressures of stereotyped identities on their own. Culture of Dissemblance explains this perfectly, “[It] occurs when a person takes on characteristics they believe to be opposite of those expected of their cultural or social group. In essence, cultural dissemblance is a coping strategy used to actively reject negative, offensive, or stereotypical characteristics” (Harris-Perry, 2011, pg. 1). While this was theorized by Darlene Clark Hine to address the survival strategy of Black women to cope with the threat of sexual exploitation during the early 1900s, it can be applied to the systemic pressures Black women face today (Harris, 2011). Because there are so many negative stereotypes that label Black women for being joyous, their only option is to not be their natural selves. It’s an inward battle of identity, in which normally an individual would only be focusing on just the looking-glass, however, Black women have to internally critique their every move. Making it easier for identity crises to arise.

#### *Identity Crises and the Five Defining Traits*

Identity and experience are akin, you cannot have one without the other. Personal experience is one form of research that is deeply important to this project. One story that continues to strike me is that of Nicole Kelly (NK), who is a Black queer podcaster, whose story resonated with me and countless others. NK is a Black woman who grew up in a small white town in Tennessee. Her story starts by talking about an event she went to in New York, where she had to unleash her inner beast. She couldn’t. While in a room full of women explaining their experiences, she still felt other, because while they were all women, they were all *white* women. The experiences of white and Black women differ drastically. Her experience is also a specific one as well, one where she grew up in a predominantly white community as a Black person. She

spent her life forming an identity that was not homogenous in Black spaces, but also made her feel “othered” in white spaces. She explains how the push and pull between her identity and community have fostered anxiety in her, she says, “For a while, I avoid Black spaces altogether” (The Heart, 2020, 18:40). This is something that many can relate to, feeling so uncomfortable in a space that it is hard to exist there. She goes on to say, “I get older and push everything down. I don’t feel Black enough, pretty enough, not confident, not good enough, I’m always feeling worried about being perfect. I’m 20 and start taking medicine for high blood pressure” (The Heart, 2020, 19:33). This continues to be a theme throughout the podcast, she explains the pressures of both worlds. This experience is not unique, and are evident themes within Black female music. I listened to five Black female artists’ music: Noname, Oshun, Solange, Sza, and Willow. Out of this research about five defining identity traits were present. They were: gender and sexual identity and expectations, social, spiritual, and race identity. These albums as a whole, centered around the Black female identity and experiences. A few of these albums were even created as their own thesis projects. Solange’s *Seat At The Table* uses interviews she conducts to introduce the next song or theme. Likewise, Sza’s *Ctrl* uses interviews to discuss identity through the Culture of Dissemblance, going back generations, speaking to her mom and her grandma. Willow’s *Willow* discusses societal expectations on her appearance and sexuality as both a Black woman and a woman in general. Noname’s *Telefone* challenges herself to be open about her identity and speak truthfully about Black identity. Oshun, a rap duo from Brooklyn created their whole rap identity from the African Goddess, Oshun. Altogether, these artists and their albums aim to empower Black women to be themselves in a world where they are constantly feeling “othered.”

*Identity and the Outside World*

These five core identities also became present in the survey portion of my research. 21 Black women responded to the survey. The purpose of the survey was to gain a better understanding of an individual's identity formation while being able to reference prior research. Furthermore, it was to learn more about all facets of the Black female identity from an outside perspective; to learn the struggles these individuals have encountered and their methods of overcoming. The majority of women formed their gender (71.4%) and sexual (42.9%) identities during their adolescent years when they were less than 10 years old. This information strongly confirms the theories of "looking-glass self" and "identity-consciousness" talked about in *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in The Cafeteria*. The majority of participants (71.4%) also felt that their identity was ever-changing. Lastly, I found that most (95%) of the women have encountered racial stereotypes, and these stereotypes have affected the formation of their identity. However, discrimination (23.8%) and microaggressions (28.6%) are the most prevalent forms of oppression that these women experience on a day-to-day basis. These participants said the best way to recharge from these societal expectations and stereotypes is to either spend time with friends or spend time at home. When asked about this in a group discussion, these participants explained that the best way to recharge and decompress from the day as feeling "othered" is through catharsis. They explained that being able to rant to someone or purge their feelings allowed them to deal with the daily pressures of being a Black woman.

*Event Planning and Black Churches*

In a world where there is a large amount of anti-blackness, spaces to be yourself need to exist. These spaces go back centuries, to the Black Church and Black spirituality. During slavery,

slaves were taught about salvation through Christianity. While this was inherently an act to erase slaves from their own heritage, slaves were able to reappropriate Christianity into a beacon of hope, proving the resilience of the community. Many spirituals were sung out of “The “songs of sorrow, love and hope,” [they] were the product of the total frustrations and strivings of the slaves. As [...] they sang these songs, “their spirits nightly floated free, though still about their hands they felt the chains.” From the sociological viewpoint, the spirituals represent [...] “the invisible church,” a basis of unity for the Black community.” (McKinney, 1971, pg. 454). Ever since, churches in the Black community are considered reappropriated places of appreciation, rejoice, and community. I spoke to two individuals who are well-versed in event planning and creating atmosphere’s for Black individuals. One of which is Bart Fitzgerald, the Founder of Legendary Mondays, a third generation preacher, and is the Founder of RUACH, a new church opening in May. He explained to me the importance of church to him as he explained that, “[It’s a] restorative space from the anti-blackness of the world”. The importance of this space is not only to recuperate from the world, but to practice tradition in gathering; this builds community and allows for a sense of hope for the future. Bart, like many others, finds spaces like this to be important, and it is one of the many reasons he is opening his new church, whose name means, “Place to breathe again, life-giving, a return to community”. With spaces like these, communities are waiting to be built. Salimatu Amabebe is another individual that I spoke to, they answered my questions through email about what it means to work on a Black-owned event for Black individuals in Portland, OR. They are the Founder and Creative Director of Black Feast, an event series that focuses on the dining experience in which there is a celebration of Black artists and writers through food. They explained that, growing support for events like these

happen naturally, and “Seeing the end result with my amazing team [...] watching my community showing up, showing love and getting to experience the food and the artist’s work - that’s what it’s all about”. While creating something new is daunting and hard, the end result is always rewarding. Bart echoed this, as he explained to me that there is always an audience for an event, and the growth of it will happen organically.

### **Expected Outcomes**

The proposed project is an event series that occurs once every three months at Thirdspace and event spaces similar; small and intimate. It allows Black women a safe space to recharge and rejoice, this is a place of inquisition and positive energy. This event will be a two-hour long event, with an hour-long live-podcast. The two hours will be broken down as follows: 30 minutes in the beginning to mingle, an hour for the live-podcast in which an interviewer will facilitate a discussion about identity with a special guest, 15 minutes for questions, 15 minutes to mingle once again. The special guest will discuss their journey with their identity and talk about who they are. This special guest is someone from the community who is excited to speak about their identity and has a story to tell. Along with each of these talks, there will be a publication in which there will be 5 to 10 stories about their journey towards their identity from an inclusive group of 5 to 10 individuals. This group of individuals will be recruited through word of mouth, as well as through a submission process. 30 copies of the publication will be available during the event. The special guest will also be chosen out of the 5-10 people who submitted their stories as well as based on the compelling aspect of their journey. They will be a highlighted participant of the monthly publication. Lastly, while this



event will take place in Portland, it will also be accessible to everyone everywhere, as there will be an online version of the podcast. This podcast will occur frequently and will be posted bi-weekly on Mondays, with special live versions every three months. Once the podcast has garnered a following, online publications will be sold as well. The idea is to encourage empowerment, and foster a safe space for the creation of identity for Black women. The event is mainly for recharging and remembering that the audience is empowered, while the publication serves as a personal reminder to the audience that everyone struggles with their identity and they are not alone.

### **Audience**

The audience of this project outcome is anyone who identifies as a Black woman. While the research is from cisgender Black women, it is important to be inclusive of all womxn, including transgender as well as nonbinary individuals who still include the womxn pronouns in their personal description. The audience is also inclusive of Pan-African individuals, as well as bi-racial individuals, and individuals from the African diaspora. While many cultures have experienced diaspora, the African diaspora is a bit unique, and can be defined as, “[The] voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world during the modern and pre-modern periods” (DePaul University, 2020). For Black individuals this means, the movement of their culture around the world as well as the individuals that were scattered across the globe and live in separate communities but also still claim the Black identity. An example of this would be Black Americans, Black French, Black Germans and so on. This can be extrapolated to define what it means to be Pan-African, that of individuals

from anywhere in the world that identify as Black and whose ethnic origins are from Africa or the Caribbean's (*Pan-Africanism, 2020*). This space would benefit from multiple voices from different backgrounds, and the audience needs to be inclusive of this.

### Timeline

- Week 1: Find a team of willing participants to help put on this event (create a small collective 2-5 people)
- Week 2: Reach out to Black women in my network to gather their stories about identity (5-10 Stories)
- Week 3: Ask someone from network to speak at the event
- Week 4: Start compiling stories editing them and designing brief publication
- Week 5: Start creating promotional materials
- Week 6: Send out promotional materials
- Week 7: Finish publication/start printing
- Week 8: Host event gather feedback, edit the podcast
- Week 9: Post online and Analyze feedback

### Budget

Expense/Materials	Vendor	Quantity	Time	Cost
Team (Collaborators) 1 Event Planner 1 Graphic Designer	-	2	10 hours/week	\$0
Speaker	Third Room Project	1	3 hours	\$0
Microphone	Third Room Project/	2	3 hours	\$0

	PSU A/V			
Sound Board	Third Room Project	1	3 hours	\$0
Venue	Third Room Project	1	3 hours	\$100
Paper (20 pages max each)	FedEx	30	5 hours	\$50
Printing (20 pages max each)	FedEx	30	5 hours	\$100
Binding	Blick/Office Depot	30	5 hours	\$8
Photographer	Friend	1	3 hours	\$100
Total				\$358

## Annotated Bibliography

1. *Defining Diaspora | About | Center for Black Diaspora | Centers & Institutes | College of Liberal Arts & Social Sciences | DePaul University, Chicago.* (n.d.). Retrieved March 2, 2020, from <https://las.depaul.edu/centers-and-institutes/center-for-black-diaspora/about/Pages/defining-diaspora.aspx>

This source was used to get a better understanding of the term *diaspora* for both Black and non-black individuals. Both definitions are slightly different, and while diaspora for non-black individuals can be used to describe it for Black individuals, this does not work the other way around. While I had prior knowledge of the word, I felt that I needed to define it for others who may not understand this concept. Because of this, I found a source that would be accessible for this prospectus and would allow me to clearly define it without having to explain it, too much, in text. I felt this would make the concept easier to understand for others who may not already know these terms.

2. Harris, A., & Mushtaq, O. (2016). Cultural Dissemblance (of African Americans). In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies* (Vol. 1–3, pp. 273–274). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483371283>

This is a useful source as it explains the idea of Cultural Dissemblance in a fast and clear way. While I believe the audience is LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, I think this is

helpful to everyone. I mostly used this as a quick tool to define the idea of cultural dissemblance and it was perfect!

3. Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011). *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. Yale University Press.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=3420728>

Through the lense of popular Black female authors, Melissa Harris-Perry is able to completely capture the Black female experience. Each section of the book starts out with an excerpt from a popular book, in which she explains the cultural significance. She then begins to dissect the piece assuming the reader has no prior knowledge of this topic. In the first chapter, Melissa explains the idea of the Black female identity through layers. She explains that Black women are not just championed as the “Strong Black Woman” to uplift, but also to oppress through creating a caricature and mascot that Black women are meant to live up to. She explains that society has always had this expectation of Black women, through an excerpt from, “The Hurricane” written by Zora Neale Hurston (1937). She dissects this piece through talking about the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, which championed Black women as “strong”, in which they had to endure a national crisis for longer than they should have.

4. *Pan-Africanism*. (n.d.). Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved March 2, 2020, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism>

This source was used to get a better understanding of the term *Pan-African*. While I have heard this term before, and even visited the Pan-African Commons at Portland State University, I found it helpful to be able to redefine it for myself again and through an academic setting. Previously I had only had the term explained to me. This text taught me some new things! Pan-Africanism is actually a political movement when refers to wanting to reunite communities from the African diaspora. But African diaspora and Pan-African work together, as both these terms just mean someone from Africa. The most interesting part is that it is considered a political movement, one I have never heard of!

5. Pittman, J. P. (2016). Double Consciousness. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/double-consciousness/>

I wanted to understand Double Consciousness apart from the book, *The Souls of Black Folk* written by W.E.B Du Bois and especially before reading the book. My understanding of the term is that it was made out of the experience the characters face in the book. It's similar to Jordan Peele's movie's *Us* or *Get Out*, in the way that this book helped define experiences that individuals felt, but did not have the word to describe, similar to *Get Out's* "The Sunken Place". I found this source helpful because it gave me a fast understanding without having to digest the whole of *The Souls of Black Folk*. While I'm still reading it, I used this as a learning tool.

6. Shorter-gooden, K., & Washington, N. C. (1996). Young, Black, and female: The challenge of weaving an identity. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19(5), 465–475.

<https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1996.0044>

In this journal, the authors explore the idea of identity through holding a focus group/survey session in which they asked 17 participants about their own identity. These participants all identified as Black women. The authors start out by defining the importance of the study, making it evident that Black women are sometimes seen as either Black, or women, but not both. In this study they found that many of the participants responded more to questions about their Black identity than their womanhood. While I think this study is interesting, it is more about how individuals racially identify and the positive nuances in this answer rather than their experiences as Black women. Most of these women in the study also noted that they did not necessarily care for their female identity. This is interesting, however, I feel this source reflects the 90s rather than this last decade.

7. Tatum, B. (2017). *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?:*

Revised Edition. Basic Books.

<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/psu/detail.action?docID=903483>

In Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum’s 20th Anniversary edition of the classic book *Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria* she explores ideas of identity formation. She recalls the popular identity formation theory of the “looking-glass self” coined by Charles Horton Cooley in 1902, in which she explains it simply, “Other people are the mirror in which we see

ourselves” (Tatum, 2017, pg. 99). While the “looking-glass self” is a complex theory, it is the idea that we form our personal perception of ourselves based on outside sources within the world. As Tatum points out, this is triggered by the questions, “Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in cultural images around me?” (Tatum, 2017, pg. 99). These guiding questions allow one to self-reflect through the mirror of someone else’s eyes. When these questions contradict how one may see themselves, this creates an ‘identity crisis’ for individuals. Individuals start to often-times negatively judge themselves based on the information about them in the world.

8. The Heart | Podcast on Spotify. (n.d.). Retrieved February 8, 2020, from

<https://open.spotify.com/show/6Mxr9rLVzvdUMXQTN58K1>

This episode of the podcast focuses on a Black woman from a predominantly white small town in Georgia. Her story starts out by talking about how she went to an event in New York recently, where she had to unleash her inner beast. But she couldn’t. While in a room full of white women explaining their experiences, how they constantly feel spoken over and nonetheless, patriarchy, she felt this but on a higher level. On the level of never being able to express herself fully in a room full of white women, because even though they’re all women, her experience as a Black woman is just different and more complex. She explains that while she grew up with Black parents, she led a drastically different life than them. Her: living her life in a white community, attending a predominantly white university. Her parents: growing up



in a Black community and then attending a historically Black university. She explains how the push and pull between her identity and community has fostered anxiety in her.

McKinney, R. I. (1971). The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 64(4), 452–481. JSTOR.

Used to explain the idea of the Black Church in my prospectus, I found this helpful because it explained Black Churches in ways that I could never articulate on my own. It also allowed me to further my knowledge and understand how I should frame this topic when giving my presentation. Overall an excellent source for wanting to understand the origins quickly. My only grievance is that it heavily cites another's work, and therefore, I found it hard to cite in my own work!

9. *The Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois. (n.d.). Retrieved February 26, 2020, from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>

Written in 1903, this book is a collection of essays on race written by W.E.B Du Bois, which continues to be a successful artifact today! This book is widely revered for the coining of the phrase Double Consciousness. While doing research, I was finding that most of the sources I was reading would talk about this theory in one way or the other so I felt that I must read it to get a deeper understanding of the theory and of what others are writing about.

10. Welang, N. (2018). Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture. 2, 296–306.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0027>

Written to discuss and redefine the W.E.B Du Bois concept of Double Consciousness Theory, that of defining Black identity through two lenses which are rooted in oppression and racism. Nahum Welang explains that Black women aren't just confined to this theory, but argues Black women have a third consciousness, that of womanhood. She takes a look at popular American depictions of Black women in 2018 and gathers that, "Black hypermasculinity [plays a role] in the marginalisation of Black female voices and the prioritisation of white women's interests within and beyond mainstream feminist spaces" (Welang, 2018, pg. 1). Furthermore, Nahum is interested in gaining a new perspective of Black womanhood through looking at popular Black women, such as Beyonce, Issa Rae in *Insecure*, and Marvel's Black Panther. Each are depictions of Black women with different identities, but who are each doing positive things in the community. This piece is notable because it redefines Double Consciousness Theory into Triple Consciousness Theory, and does so through referencing the works of Black feminist writer, Roxane Gay who's mission is to make the feminist movement more inclusive. I find that through my own research, I would also like to further reappropriate this theory and make it more inclusive of the Black female experience.