

What Are We Made of?

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A young African-American man's inquiry about his ethnicity to his grandmother reveals a broader narrative of African-Americans forming a unique and resilient culture in the U.S. despite the systematic erosion of their African heritage due to slavery and colonization, as discussed in Frantz Fanon's "The Wretched of the Earth."



Strength and Resilience: Portraying the Faces of a New African-American Culture Forged from a Legacy of Diversity and Creativity. United in struggle, resilience, and hope, their faces tell stories of determination that cannot be silenced.

Once, an African-American young man asked his grandmother, “What are we made of?” He asked his grandmother what races made up his ethnicity and his family’s ethnicity. His grandmother relayed all of the ethnicities and races that the family was comprised of with ease and self-respect. The young man smiled. The question that this young man asked his grandmother is one that many African-Americans can ask of their grandparents. The people who call themselves African-Americans or Black Americans are made up of many races, leading to them being a variety of colors and shades. This variety of color is due to the colonization of Africans in America during slavery. This colonization has led to the annihilation of many aspects of the African culture of those who were brought over from the continent, causing the colonized Africans to create a new culture in America.

In his work entitled “The Wretched of the Earth,” Frantz Fanon articulates that colonial domination affects the cultural and social life of conquered people. This is true of the Africans that were brought over to America during the time of slavery. Many aspects of African life had to be hidden or obliterated.

THIS NEW AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE IS STILL VULNERABLE BECAUSE IT IS CONTINUALLY BEING IMITATED BY NON-AFRICAN-AMERICANS. HOWEVER, AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE SO CREATIVE THAT THEY CONSTANTLY CONCEIVE NEW CULTURAL STYLES, OFTEN AS POPULAR AS THE ONES BEFORE THEM.

The Africans lost most of their identity in slavery, therefore depriving them of much of their cultural history. “A national culture under colonial domination is a contested culture whose destruction is sought in systematic fashion. It very quickly becomes a culture condemned to secrecy” (Fanon 1441). The captured people of Africa in the United States made a new culture for themselves in the slave houses, in the fields, and as formerly enslaved people. They took what they remembered from their African culture and history and made it into a new culture and history, the African-American culture and history. “By the time a century or two of exploitation has passed there comes a veritable emaciation of the stock of national culture. It becomes a set of automatic habits, some traditions of dress, and a few broken-down institutions” (1441). This emaciation of the African culture happened in America, but it led to the creation of a whole new culture. The African-American culture was created so that they could express themselves and their creativity.

African Americans created new music, literature, art, fashion, and dance styles that have permeated the United States' culture. These new music, literature, art, fashion, and dance styles have exponentially led to the creation of many other styles. “The continued cohesion of

the people constitutes for the intellectual an invitation to go further than his cry for protest” (1442). African Americans have shown their intellect through their creativity, often creating music that stretched notes further than they had ever been pushed before. The creativity of African Americans has allowed them to perform athletic feats that had never been seen before. The creativity of the African-Americans has been the outlet for many to show their style, creativity, and intellect. Many of the aspects of the African-American culture have been assimilated into the mainstream culture of America, with many non-African-Americans, specifically Anglo-American people copying these styles. “Well before the political or fighting phase of the national movement, an attentive spectator can thus feel and see the manifestation of new vigor and feel the approaching conflict” (1444). African Americans had to struggle for their identity as a people in America. They have done an excellent job of doing that. They were responsible to themselves, their ancestors, and their children to create a culture expressing their African heritage. This new African-American culture is still vulnerable because non-African-Americans are continually imitating it. However, African Americans are so creative that they constantly conceive new cultural styles, often as popular as the ones before them.

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Delving into this cultural transformation, it becomes evident that creating a new African American identity was not merely a survival mechanism but a profound act of resilience and creativity. These endeavors in music, literature, art, and dance enriched their community and offered a profound cultural gift to the world. This gift, however, comes with its own set of challenges, as it continually faces appropriation and dilution by dominant cultures, leaving African Americans in a perpetual struggle to maintain authenticity while influencing global culture.

The young man's story and his grandmother's story underscore a crucial aspect of African-American identity: the relentless pursuit of knowledge about one's roots and the desire to reclaim what was forcibly erased. This act of asking and remembering is not just about knowing one's ethnic makeup but is a powerful reaffirmation of one's place in history and a claim to the future.

African Americans, therefore, are not just survivors of a harsh historical legacy but are creators of a dynamic culture that refuses to be static. They are innovators who continually redefine what it means to be African American in a society that still grapples with deep-seated racial issues. Their culture is a vivid mosaic composed of fragments from the past, vibrant expressions of the present, and resilient hopes for the future. This culture, rich with the echoes of Africa and the innovations born from necessity, is a testament to their unyielding spirit and endless creativity.

In this context, the intellectual's role, as noted by Fanon, extends beyond mere observation to active participation in cultivating and promoting these universalizing values that not only celebrate African-American resilience but also foster a broader understanding of human dignity across cultures.

The young man's simple question to his grandmother thus becomes a beacon, illuminating the path toward cultural revitalization and the affirmation of an identity forged through adversity, creativity, and the unbreakable will of a people determined to not just survive but thrive. Through their continued cultural contributions, African Americans shape their destiny and enrich the worldwide landscape of human culture.

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The young man's question of his grandmother was more poignant than the young man would ever realize. African Americans are made up of strong people who love themselves, their families, and, most importantly, their culture. They took aspects of their original culture and parts of the cultures of the new world they were in and created a brand new culture that they could call their own and that others would want to emulate.

"If man is known by his acts, then we will say that the most urgent thing today for the intellect is to build up his nation. If this building up is true, that is to say if it interprets the manifest will of the people and reveals the eager African peoples, then the building of a nation is of necessity accompanied by the discovery and encouragement of universalizing values" (1446).

Works Cited

Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. 1440-1446. Print.