Paving the Way for President Obama: Constructing American Citizenship through the Narrative Disruption of Binaries in The Souls of Black Folk

Kyung-Sook Boo

What makes America a nation? What makes Americans American? Who gets to be American? Why, and how? These are all questions that are surprisingly enough still being debated hotly in America today, in political, cultural, and academic forums, and in private conversations as well as individual thoughts. Even though more than two centuries have passed since The Declaration of Independence was penned in 1776, and America as a nation has long been one of the world’s strongest superpowers, with the term American standing for a particular identity worldwide, there is yet no concrete or generally agreed upon definition or understanding of what exactly "American" means, other than having possession of an American passport.

One can be born and raised in America, and thus be called an American. But one can also be born outside of the boundaries of the nation-state of America in another land, never set foot in America or participate in any kind of American life, yet nevertheless be American if one’s parents have American passports. One can be born and raised anywhere on the earth, yet move to America and through the naturalization process, become American, acquiring an American passport along the way. One can have lived
in America most of one's life, with "American" values and lifestyles, and paid taxes to the American government, yet not be American, due to the lack of citizenship that would allow an American passport to be issued. So it seems that the term American indicates the fact that one is a loyal citizen of America, regardless of geographical, social, historical, political, racial, or ethnic background, and also of whether one came into possession of that citizenship through birth or naturalization.

Yes, and no. That is the external legal meaning of being an American citizen. That is what it means to be American on legal documents, and abroad, outside of America. However, that is not what American citizenship means internally in America—in domestic issues and policies, in everyday American life, and in the minds and hearts of "Americans." Somehow, in these contexts, the term American becomes dissociated from citizenship, and loses its consensus, or unity, as a national—political, cultural, and legal—identity within the borders of America, and becomes a racialized term that refers to specific groups of American citizens or is used as a code word to exclude other groups of American citizens from that definition.

The application of this racialized term, American, varies from situation to situation. For instance, in general, it means "white." Hence even in the so-called politically correct climate of contemporary America, only whites are referred to as simply being "American," while all other racial or ethnic groups become hyphenized. For instance, while blacks are called "African-American" (regardless of all the different ethnicities within that racial group, and with no distinction between the different historical and geographical heritages of "black" people), people of Asian ancestry (even though "Asian" includes several different