
Black Identity Viewed from a Barber’s Chair: Nigrescence and Eudaimonia

William E. Cross, Jr., PhD received his doctorate in social psychology from Princeton University and is the author of a previously important book on black identity titled Shades of Black, published by Temple University Press in 1991. In 2017 Dr. Cross was accorded emeritus status by the University of Denver, where he held a joint appointment in Counseling Psychology and Higher Education. The first twenty years of his academic career were spent at the African Studies and Research Center, Cornell University. These followed appointments at Penn State, UMass-Amherst, and UNLV, and ten years with the Critical Psychology Program at the Graduate Center-CUNY, in New York City.

Black Identity Viewed from a Barber’s Chair opens with the author recalling a fond childhood memory, when his sister took him for a haircut at a barber shop on 67th Street in Chicago. The child’s seat was perched on top of the chair arm rests, thus elevating him and providing a dramatic view of all the mostly working-class black men, as they entered the shop. Each was greeted by a nickname shouted out by one of the barbers, making for a celebratory entrance. Later in life, while preparing to teach a Black Studies course covering Black Families and the Socialization of Black Children at Cornell University, he ran smack-dab into the deficit perspective on black life that seemed to defy the reality of the normal black men he witnessed in the barber shop. This experience triggered his life-long motivation to write a book that challenged negative perceptions of the “normal” black men seen in the barber shop. In Black Identity Viewed from a Barber’s Chair, the author revisits his ground-breaking model on black identity awakening known as Nigrescence, connects the concept of double consciousness with a detailed analysis of how black identity is “performed” in everyday life, traces the actual origins of the so-called inferior black culture trope followed by a devastating critique showing the trope was never based on sound social science to begin with. Having destroyed the notion that slaves exited slavery and entered freedom with a dysfunctional culture, findings reported in the final chapter are probably the most controversial. Cross points out after 1807 when the slave trade was made illegal, plantation owners generated new profits by “breeding” new slaves. However, Cross shows that what was breeding for the owners became birthing and caring for new infants, from the perspective of the slave community. Since underage children were of limited value and needed to grow into early adolescence before being assigned “maximum value as property,” the Slave community had primary responsibility to raise children from infancy through early childhood, the time period that modern psychology shows accounts for the evolution of a great deal of a person’s personality. Without any hint of romanticizing the nature of slavery, Cross demonstrates how the slaves were able to create a positive ecology of infant care and early childhood development that operated side-by-side with the owner’s design for “breeding.” Cross takes a diurnal approach where two different views of reality stand side by side: That of the owner as compared to that of captive Africans. To support his claims, Cross points to the historical record showing large plantations had nurseries run by elderly and infirmed black women as well as historical evidence showing black mothers created ingenious wraps allowing them touckle infants, even while working. Cross pays particular attention to historical records highlighting ex-slaves who achieved considerable success after emancipation in a relatively short span of time. Such persons were raised by slaves during their formative years and the personality and interpersonal competence formed as such, became assets for the now free person, as he or she forged a new life in freedom. Cross is able to trace and link the legacy of slave competence at raising infants to become productive adults through case studies from the 1950’s. Lastly, across several chapters Cross shows how economic factors more so than cultural trends, best explain the twists and turns exhibited by both black and white working class and lower-class people, when ensnared in the economic downturn known as De-industrialization. That is to say, social class has more explanatory power than does race, and this has probably been the case from Emancipation onward.