

Re-Imagining Identities: Racial and Ethnic Discourses within Seattle's Habesha Community

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Abstract

My research explores the means by which identities of “non-white” Habesha (Ethiopian and Eritrean) immigrants are negotiated through the use of media, community spaces, collectivism, and activism. As subjects who do not have a longstanding historical past in the United States, Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants face the challenges of having to re-construct and negotiate their identities within American binary Black/White racial landscapes. To explore the ways in which ethnicity-based collectivism and activism challenge stereotypical portrayals of Habeshanness and blackness which are typically cemented through media, I focus on unpacking mediated representations of Hana Alemu Williams, her death, trial, and subsequent support from the Ethiopian Community of Seattle (ECS). In short, Hana Alemu Williams was an Ethiopian child who died in 2011 from abuse, severe malnutrition, and cruelty at the hands of her White adoptive family in Sedro-Woolley Washington. Through close readings of various media: news paper articles, television news broadcastings, and blogs I critically analyze the moments in which Habesha immigrants challenge narratives of race and identity in the American context. I find that while Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants sometimes assimilate into American constructions of race, at other moments they create counter-narratives of hybridity, exclusive ethnic identities, or maintain purely national identities as Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants, in an effort to defer perceived racial stereotypes and oppression that arise from identifying with an undifferentiated black identity. This research enriches existing academic literature by creating a more nuanced understanding of Seattle Habesha community racial and ethnic discourses in their efforts to re-imagine Habesha identities.

Key Terms: Ethiopian, Eritrean, Habesha/Habasha, African American, Hana Alemu Williams, Post-Race, Colorblindness, and Critical Race Theory

Introduction

The prevailing racial discourse in the American news media affirms the perspective that racial barriers and discriminatory practices are no longer pervasive issues in American society. Since the significant legal and social gains of the Civil Rights Movement, numerous racial projects have rolled back remedies such as those endorsed through affirmative action (Omi & Winant, 1994). The recent and highly publicized narratives of the Trayvon Martin case have highlighted the pervasiveness and potent implications of race and racism in America. Though framed differently, the Hana Alemu Williams case occurred at the same time as the nation was consumed by the story of Trayvon Martin and his tragic death. Interestingly, both cases gained momentum and significance through political and collective activism spearheaded by community members and allies. Though I will not go into much detail about Trayvon Martin, I think it is important to consider both cases conterminously because both differently highlight how race, racism, ethnicity, citizenship, and gender become framed discursively throughout media.

Through these discussions, my aim is to further explore the multi-dimensionality of race, ethnicity, and identity within American racial formation by offering counter-narratives of Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants whose experiences haven't been included and preserved in academic and popular master narratives regarding race.

Colorblind and Post-Race Ideology

Before going any further, I will call attention to some of the current controlling ideologies saturating popular considerations and discussions of race and racism in America. Many of the prevailing media messages broadcast notions that we live in a "colorblind" and "post" racial society. One of the earliest uses of colorblind ideology occurred in 1947 when Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP used colorblindness as a legal strategy to quickly end Jim Crow segregation by claiming, "classifications and distinctions based on race or color have no moral or legal validity in our society. They are contrary to our constitution and laws..." (Hanley-Lopez, 2010, p.809). In this instance, colorblindness was a conceptual tool used to attack the legalized racial segregation upheld by *Plessy v. Ferguson* and Jim Crow ideology—regulations that relied on using racially essentialist distinctions to constitutionally sanction privilege and value to those positioned as White (Harris, 1993). Legal scholar, Derrick Bell contends that even though whites may conceptually believe that blacks are citizens entitled to constitutional protection against discrimination, few are willing to acknowledge that

racial segregation is significantly more than a “series of quaint customs” that can be resolved effectively without altering the privileged status of whiteness (1980, p.522). For these reasons, the *Brown* decision cannot be understood without considering its benefit to whites and whiteness. Bell emphasizes that the “principle of interest convergence provides: The interest of blacks in achieving racial equity will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (1980, p.523). Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregation’s harmful consequences on black children were only addressed by requiring that facilities be made more “equal”. Commitment to de-segregation only took place when whites policymakers, and the NAACP recognized the potential economic and political benefits that could take place with integration. Legal support of constitutional colorblindness and integration: provided credibility to America’s battles against communism, had the potential to spur economic growth in the South which had state sponsored segregation, and would help mollify the disillusionment and anger felt by Black Americans – especially those who had fought for America in WWI and WWII (Bell, 1980). The initially fruitful use of colorblindness as a race-conscious remedying tool against segregationist policy was possible only because it converged with preserving the self-interests, ideologies, expectations, and proprietary value of upper/middle class whiteness (Bell, 1980; Milner, 2008; Harris, 1993).

Even with “all deliberate speed” following the *Brown* decision, official and constitutional colorblindness soon became inadequate to address inequalities that for centuries had been upheld by American law as racially contingent and natural. Proponents of the Civil Rights Movement began emphasizing the need for “race conscious remedies” while opponents of further integration adopted the rhetoric of colorblindness in hopes of de-regulating and obstructing further integration (Hanley-Lopez, 2010). In 1955, a counterargument was given that indicated the onslaught of the colorblind ideology that would be used to impede the efforts of race-conscious integration and civil rights measures. In the words of opponents of integration: “The Constitution...does not require integration. It merely forbids discrimination. It does not forbid such segregation as occurs as the result of voluntary action. It merely forbids the use of governmental power to enforce segregation” (Hanley-Lopez, 2010, p.810). By the late 1970’s the colorblind rhetoric became associated to opposition of Affirmative Action based projects that aimed to remedy racial injustices through structural reform by those who are unwilling to recognize that true equity will require the “surrender of racism granted privileges for whites” (Bell, 1980, p.523). Trends in de-regulating equity continue in the 21st century

as popular media personalities explicitly and implicitly preach about America's post-racial status.

The "post" paradigm is founded upon the idea that race no longer really matters by advocates who both consciously and unconsciously overlook the systemic and institutional oppressions that shape many individuals' livelihoods in America. In other words, for marginalized groups (in this case, those not fitting the norms of being White, male/masculine, heterosexual, middle class...etc.) living behind the precarious veil of the "post," the material reality is bitterly different from these ahistorical and surface conversations. Race scholar Ralina Joseph maintains that, "in order to garner support for "colorblind" political measures... pundits and politicians proselytize about post-race to create the illusion that the contemporary United States is a racially level playing field where race-based measures are not only unnecessary for people of color, but actually disempower whites" (2009, p.240). By ignoring many inequities that have distinctly racial dimensions, and even at times claiming reverse-racism, adherents of the colorblind ideology either chose to ignore "seeing" race or disregard racialized oppression by viewing race as simply a harmless cultural signifier. That is to say, they fail to acknowledge the socio-historical and contemporary experiences of race and racialization, which has legally and socially privileged whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Post-race and colorblind politics together have been used to avoid challenging and honest discussions of race and racism in America. Even though many Americans feel that racism is no longer a major problem, one cannot dismiss the existence of racialized health disparities, the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 2005), the "war on welfare"/ assessments of black mothers as aberrant "welfare queens", the race-based gentrification of neighborhoods, the lack of equitable representations of minorities in positions of power, and the everyday micro-aggressions and coded racism faced by marginalized groups. In their efforts to dismiss race, racism, and racialization, post-race and colorblind paradigms actually make us a more color-conscious nation bent on controlling those seeking to address racism in all of its representations. To address the problematic and erroneous foundations of post-race and colorblind ideologies, which suggest that race is irrelevant to identity and privilege or lack thereof, I will call attention to the theoretical approaches developed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) with the goal of providing a critical thinking framework to be used in comprehending my work's significance.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Emerging out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) during the late 1980's, Critical Race Theory refutes the ideal premises that American law is neutral and objective; however, these notions are destructive conceptions that obscure white privilege in all facets of American law and society. Even racial projects aimed at anti-discriminatory law are "structured to maintain white privilege" through interest convergence (Valdes, F. et al., 2002 (p.1); Bell, 1980; Omi & Winant, 1994). CRT functions as a critical model to frame and interpret society by centralizing race and racism and claiming that racism in American society is everyday, not abnormal. CRT challenges three popular beliefs about racial injustice: colorblindness will eliminate racism, racism can be addressed without considering the intersectionality of oppressions, and racism is a matter of individuals - not systems. In opposition to these misconceptions, Critical Race Theorist's advocate for a race-conscious, intersectional, and systemic/structural analysis of racism (Valdes, F. et al., 2002). Within the framework of CRT, racial inequality is something that "permeates every aspect of social life from minute, intimate relationships, to the neighborhoods we live in, and the schools we go to, all the way to macro-economic systems" (Zamudio, M. et al., 2011, p.3). By offering us a historically contingent, systemic, and multidimensional understanding of race and racialization, CRT can be used to challenge racism and white supremacy. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential election emphasizes CRT scholarship's potential to locate the problematically essentialist, marginalizing, and contested nature of socially constructed identities.

Critical Race Theory in Action

November 4th 2008 was a momentous day for many Americans. A little over fifty years after the non-violent civil rights protestors were sprayed down by hoses, chased by dogs, and killed for their quest in racial desegregation and equity, Americans proudly elected their first black president. The election of Barack Obama has become the single most cited indication of America's move towards a post-racial and colorblind society. These discourses occurred at the same time that Obama was being popularly depicted as an ape, a Muslim extremist/terrorist, an uneducated thug, Black Nationalist, questioned on the validity of his American citizenship, and even his blackness. Critical Race Theory allows us to deconstruct and critically examine the ahistorical master narrative by offering us a race-conscious model that centers race in discourses of inequity. With this framework, it becomes evident that the election of Obama was not a colorblind or post-racial

moment. In all actuality, Americans voted heavily along racial lines and the election was an instance of interest convergence.

Despite Obama's victory, we remain in a color and race-conscious society shaped by discriminatory social, cultural, and political systems that are neither "post" nor "blind". To comprehend the representational implications of the colorblind and post-race paradigms I will use Critical Race Theory as an analytical framework for my discussions of Habesha identity, Ethiopian nationalism, and Hana Alemu Williams. As an analytical and social justice apparatus, CRT allows me to recognize and critique contemporary American and Ethiopian/Eritrean racisms that are otherwise hard to discern as a consequence of post-racial and colorblind rhetoric, and racial projects that are no longer overtly linked to racist attitudes and laws.

Ethiopian Nationalism, Ethnicity, Famine and Media

On October 23rd and 24th of 1984, the BBC broadcasted an eight-minute report on the devastating famine in Korem, Ethiopia. During this unprecedented televised report, British journalist Michael Buerk cited the crisis as being an "almost biblical famine, now, in the 20th century" (Buerk, 1984). The reporting heavily relied on juxtaposing the wealth of Western civilization to the unbelievable devastations taking place in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Following this historic moment, international media embraced gripping images of famine in Ethiopia. Images of feminized vulnerability, deprivation, mortality, and antiquity galvanized a series of benefit concerts, White charity, and newfound interest in the Horn of Africa. Because such images were media representations of the "Other", and thus inherently problematic, it's important to consider them (along with the images of continued famine aggravated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1990's and early 21st century) in relation to the particular political and ideological economies in which the images were produced and consumed.

The media spectacles and western discourse on Ethiopia's famine and suffering created a discursive space where, "certain voices were given prominence while others were ignored and silenced" (Sorenson, 1993, p.38). Western scholarship centered the Amhara people (ethnic group) of Ethiopia as the "unifying genius of Ethiopia, bringing together disparate ethnic groups within a common identity" (Sorenson, 1993). Such framing aligned with and reinforced Amhara claims to governmental power and ethnic exceptionalism. Such claims are rooted in mythologies of primordial ethnic and national origins stretching to the kingdom of Axum, ancestral ties to Christianity through King Solomon, and racial superiority that situates the Amhara (Habesha) people as not-

black, but almost White and rightful sovereign inhabitants of Greater Ethiopia. Opposing local assertions and conversations about Ethiopian nationalism, history, ethnicity/identity, and power relations told a very different story – one that complicated illustrations of the Horn of Africa as an undifferentiated “Other”. In reality, varying and alienated ethnic groups, like Oromos and Eritreans, were fighting for recognition and power.

The Ethiopian state was once an influential signifier of African nationalism, pan-Africanism, black greatness, antiquity and pride. Many Africans and African Americans who considerably opposed Italy’s 1935 invasion of Ethiopia became surrounded with new associations by the late 20th century (Sorenson, 1993). Western news media functioned as ideological institutions that created a “crisis of representation” where the relations between power and knowledge and a rupture between signifier and signified effectively created an imaginary “Other” that embodied Western preoccupations and agendas around Christianity, charity, and communism (Sorenson 1993). The imaginings of Ethiopia cemented through media are discursive constructions that relied, and still rely on the expansive and political interplay of Christian mythology, anti-communist sentiments, and racism; discourses that invalidated competing local narratives voiced by subjugated (darker-skinned and/or Muslim) ethnic groups by upholding Amhara exceptionalism and legitimacy.

In *Sister Citizen*, Melissa Harris-Perry maintains that the “neither neutral nor benign gaze” of the powerful functions as a political act which results in a type of misrecognition that hinders the ability of marginalized people to self-determine and act as citizens (2011, p.40). The portrayals and discussions surrounding famine in the Horn of Africa delimited ethnically varying citizens of Ethiopia and Eritrea to a sensationalized trope of unity. The media focused on disseminating images of famished women, mothers and children to underscore the magnitude of the shortage to horror-struck Westerners. Marginalized ethnic groups in Ethiopia were denied their opportunity for accurate recognition and thus their claims for equity, political inclusion, and even secession from the nation-state were denied legitimacy by Western interests that supported Amhara assertions for a Greater Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Immigrants in America

Trailing the 1965 Immigration Act, the Refugee Act of 1980, and the Diversity Visa Program of the Immigration Act of 1990, there was a spike in African immigration into America (Chacko, 2003). Between 1980 and 2000 alone, nearly half of the 36,000 African migrants that were “fleeing civil wars and totalitarian governments” and were admitted

as permanent residents to the United States were from Ethiopia and Eritrea (Chacko, 2003, p.495). During the decades following their attainment of U.S. citizenship it was common for immigrants to sponsor the entry of their family members into the country. Furthermore, those who immigrated through the Diversity Visa Program were mainly professionals and educated individuals.

The processes of identity formation/reformation among minority groups like Ethiopians and Eritreans is fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Assimilation into American citizenship for minority/black-bodied immigrants does not follow a linear trajectory (cultural assimilation that progressively leads to complete absorption into dominant society) due to persistent barriers that stem from ideological and structural racism. In other words, Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants are faced with dichotomous American racial boundaries that construct an imaginary and undifferentiated Black identity. The ethnic boundaries, which have material and sociocultural implications in their homelands in effect, begin to lose their nuanced significance. Underplaying the more expansive classification of “Black”, first-generation Black Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants many times emphasize their national and ethnic origins while resisting classification with American Blacks and Blackness (Mohammed, 2006; Chacko, 2003). According to Elizabeth Chacko, Black immigrants resist identification with “American Blacks for a number of reasons, including prejudices against native Blacks, general aversion to an undistinguished Black identity, and pride in national identity” (2003, p.494). First generation Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants who often associate the designation “African American” with native Blacks, from whom they differentiate themselves, also attempt to instill their aversion towards a monolithic Black identity within their children who face more peer pressure to assimilate into American conceptions of Blackness.

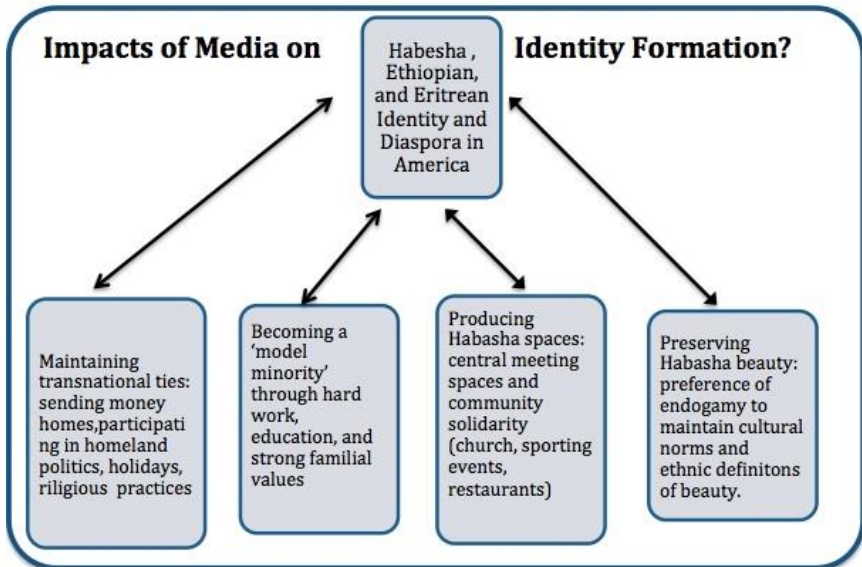


Figure 1. *Categories of Immigrant Habesha Identity Summarized from Literature Review (Habecker, 2012; Mohammed 2006; Chacko, 2003) – How are these categories affected by media representations? How do these categories call for a “post” and unified identity?*

Shelly Habecker’s findings suggest that Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants from Amhara and Tigrinya ethnic backgrounds “viewed their Habesha identity as a separate ethnic and racial category that is not black and that emphasizes their Semitic origins” (Habecker, 2011, p.1215). The immigrants in her research used this view to distinguish themselves from African Americans and the rest of the African diaspora around the world. As highlighted in the chart, Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants tend to display their difference through multiple methods including: group preference for endogamy, emphasis on education and becoming ‘model minorities’, production of Habesha cultural spaces or ‘ethnic sociocommescapes’ (Chacko, 2003), and maintenance of ties to their homeland (Habecker, 2011). The conservation of such cultural traditions helps Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants contest full assimilation into American society. Because many Black immigrants, including Habesha, fear that being categorized as African American would, “lead them on a path to downward mobility, despite the gains that middle-class African Americans have made in recent years” (Habecker, 2011, p.1215) they resist full assimilation into American racial formations. In addition, these patterns of “strategic assimilation” (2011) allow Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants to mitigate racist experiences while forcing Americans to acknowledge that there are a myriad of ethnic, cultural, and national differences within the Black diaspora.

A "Post" and "Blind" Identity: "Are you Habesha?"

This question reverberates throughout the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and greater East African diaspora as people try to pin down each other's national and ethnic origins. Historically, those who lay claim to Habesha identity have also been Amhara elites who claimed power through racist and hegemonic means. Like whiteness, Habesha ethnic identity in the Horn of Africa has been constructed through oppressive, racist, and essentialist means that privileged the Amhara, Tigre, and Tigrinya peoples of Ethiopia who are predominantly Orthodox Christian. Those who have maintained powerful positions and lighter skin/European features have also maintained Habesha exceptionalism through the construction of mythical Christian origins centered on Queen Sheba and King Solomon. Discursive representations of Habesha identity rely on myths of exceptionalism and difference.

The question, "*Are you Habesha?*" is usually followed by more questions regarding what Ethiopian language you speak, and on occasion what ethnic region or ethnicity you associate with - if any at all. When I first heard the term being used so enthusiastically I made a point of asking fellow 1.5 and second-generation immigrant friends what they thought it meant. Most young or American-raised Ethiopians and Eritreans use the term to refer to themselves and others in a way that eliminates the distinctions between the different tribes/ethnic groups while also eliciting pride and a discourse of a greater and unified Habesha (Ethiopian/Eritrean) identity. Having learned that I shouldn't identify as Habesha because my ethnic heritage is predominantly Amhara, and in turn problematic, I was confounded by the active reclamation of an identifier that is historically fraught with politics of exclusion and racism.

Not all people readily claim Habesha identity, and some, like those who identify with Eritrea or Oromia nationalist efforts find it to be an offensive and oppressive identifier. Similar to post-race and colorblind ideologies, Habesha identity results in disregarding the implications of race and racism. The call for a Greater Ethiopia and a collective, diverse and undifferentiated Habesha identity de-emphasizes Ethiopia's long history in denying certain groups access to privilege and power. While Greater Ethiopian nationalist discourse asserts the notion of unity, Eritrean nationalist efforts emphasize a "decisive transformation under Italian colonialism" while rarely projecting a unified Ethiopian identity situated in antiquity (Sorenson, 1993, p.42). Like the post-race paradigm, Habesha identity politics are easily and readily circulated in media and everyday discussions. For instance, searching "Habesha" or

“Habesha problems” on YouTube retrieves videos of 1.5 and second generation Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants parodying their liminal ethnic experiences in juxtaposition to their exceedingly Habesha relatives. Most of these videos are just made to be humorous and sentimental but they can be read as denoting the ambivalent feelings most Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants have toward completely assimilating into American society.

One of the common underlying misunderstanding I’ve heard uttered by Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants, especially by first generation immigrants who entered the states at an older age, is that identifying as Black is correlative to being African American – or that one necessitates the other, and thus if one claims blackness without *Habeshaness* (which within current popular discourses emphasizes a greater and collective identity that de-emphasizes ethnic and national differences) then the result will be a reduction in access to resources which are necessary for attaining the “American dream”. This problematic misconception of blackness (especially blackness associated with African Americans) is in part due to the ahistorical and stereotypical portrayals perpetuated by popular western media. These media sources are many times the main mediums through which Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants establish their stereotypes and understandings of race relations and racism in America. Because blackness is commonly depicted as being in opposition to Whiteness rather than as different and fluid within each subject who embodies it, many immigrant Ethiopian/Eritrean families fear being categorized into the dichotomy. For immigrants entering a sphere where their identities are already presubscribed, the path of least resistance is to maintain ethnic differences that distinguish them from aberrant depictions of blackness. Consequently, many first generation immigrants take part in conversations that stress moving away from problematic identities of blackness towards that of greater Habesha singularity and model minority positionality.

To consider the ways in which Habesha, Ethiopians, and Eritreans go about negotiating their identities, it’s important to consider earlier mediations of the Horn of Africa because for many people (like White Westerners), their first experience of seeing Ethiopian/Eritreans is through mediated contexts where their identities are denied fullness and restricted to confines of starvation, poverty, illness, and helplessness. In addition, these media representations can’t be fully understood without considering the connotations of the identifier “Habesha” as well as Ethiopia’s political and racial history. In considering the tragic story of Hana Alemu (also known as Hana Grace-Rose Williams but I will use her Ethiopian birth name when referring to her throughout my discussion) I will situate her case within the greater discourses I’ve

highlighted as pertaining to Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Habesha immigrant identity within America.

Critically Situating Hana

In 2008, Carri and Larry Williams adopted a hopeful Hana Alemu and a younger boy named Immanuel, who is deaf, from Ethiopia. According to reports, the couple decided to adopt Hana after watching a 60-second video of a “tearful but healthy Hana” (without ever meeting her or Emmanuel (Joyce, 2013). The Williams, who already had seven biological children, brought Hana and Immanuel to their strictly Christian disciplined Sedro-Woolley Washington home. Three years later on May 11th, Hana’s severely underweight, naked, and wounded body was found lying facedown in her parent’s backyard. Hana was later pronounced dead at the hospital due to hypothermia, malnutrition, and gastritis. Two years after Hana’s death, Carri Williams was sentenced to 37 years in prison after being convicted guilty of homicide by abuse while her husband Larry Williams was sentenced to 28 years (Cole, 2013). Throughout the media coverage of the case, activist efforts led by a coalition of the Ethiopian Community in Seattle (ECS/ECC) and infuriated adoptive parents advocated for more regulation in thwarting such abuses from happening again to adopted children.

One of the only other public moments where similarly collective actions indicated Habesha collective identity was during the successful re-naming of an area to “Little Ethiopia” in Los Angeles, California. This incident fueled a similar movement in Washington, D.C. where Ethiopian community members and business owners campaigned for a renaming of 9th and U Street to “Little Ethiopia”. The D.C. Ethiopian community failed in their attempts to officially claim this particular area, which has historically been associated with African Americans, because African Americans contested their efforts. The failure in D.C. and successes in Los Angeles allow for an imagining of Ethiopian-ness as a genuine category of racial and ethnic identification by both outsiders and immigrants by offering ethnicity as grounds for public and political debate. It’s also necessary to understand that the popular recognition of “Little *Ethiopia*” in both D.C. and L.A. leave out and minimize the claims of difference made by groups who have historically been excluded from positions of power. In essence, claims to difference are denied by asserting an all inclusive and unifying identity of Habesha-ness and Ethiopian-ness to which Eritreans, Oromia nationalist and other opposing groups unavoidably fall under.

Aside from serving as a moment for imagining a unified identity and community, the mediation of Hana Alemu William’s story helped to

assert claims of American citizenship by Ethiopian immigrants on a public sphere. Benedict Anderson remarks that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (2006, p.6) and even though “any given nation will never meet most of their fellow citizens, it is imagined as limited, as sovereign and as a community” (Anderson, 2006; Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, p.53). Drawing from Anderson’s discussion of print media in which the, “newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life” (2006, p.36), I contend that media representations (television, radio, newspaper, and online news productions) of Hana’s story functioned in maintaining the imagined Greater Ethiopian and Habesha identity. The case offered a unique opportunity for self-actualization and recognition where through community-based identity and solidarity, Seattle Habesha, more specifically Ethiopians (through the nomenclature of ECC/ECS), were able to assert their presence through successful participation in America’s legal system. They claimed a self-actualized identity that didn’t center righteous White compassion and charity, the helplessness of Ethiopians (especially women), and also managed to underscore difference from African American blackness by extending a compulsory unified Ethiopian/Habesha identity was readily available for consumption for all Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrants during the media coverage of Hana’s story.

Anti-black impulses are so great in America that even while there was no evidence of race being contributing factor in Hana’s death, racism wasn’t even explored as a possibility. Habesha exceptionality and difference is solidified by public displays of self-actualization and recognition through legal means that in turn are supportive of colorblind and post-racial rhetoric because they fail to address race and racism by focusing on Habesha/Ethiopian exceptionalism and ethnicity. For instance, Hana Alemu Williams was never regarded as a Black subject who underwent severe cruelty at the hands of a racist White family in news media coverage. This could very well have been the storyline used by the Ethiopian Community considering how Trayvon Martin’s case played out throughout the media during the same time period. By detaching the specific episodes leading to Hana’s death from the larger debates of White racism, the Habesha community was able to solidify their presence and citizenship as separate from that of African Americans. The significance of this conversation can more easily be realized when understood in regards to African American’s longstanding fight against inaccurate, shameful, and stereotyped representations within

the public sphere. Such limited representations of blackness lead to myths and stereotypes that “Other” and undermine Black subjectivities and in effect profoundly shape African American politics by making it difficult for Black individuals to assert claims in American politics.

The experience of double-consciousness, and the shame which misrecognition provokes, undermine the possibility of equal access to democratic participation and self-determination by Black-bodied immigrants in America (Du Bois, 1903; Harris-Perry, 2011). Hana’s story could have easily elicited the images of feminized famine from the 1980’s, prompted a discussion of the issue of lucrative adoption practices which grew due to high rates of orphanage resulting from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, or even become framed as an incident of White-on-Black crime taking place under the guise of White Christian charity. These possible representations were missing in the media coverage because of the ways in which Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Habesha communities re-imagine their native and ethnic identities in the face of the new challenges that come with immigration status.

Conclusion

With a continuous shift in racial and ethnic structures in America, along with growing discussions of multi-ethnicity, multi-raciality, multiculturalism, post-race, and colorblindness amongst academics and those claiming layered identities, further research about Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrant groups is necessary. Current academic conversations about identity and culture overlook the presence and influence of Habesha and/or Ethiopian/Eritrean immigrant communities within America. In order to move past binary understandings and conversations about race and ethnicity, as well as address the racism that occurs within and against America’s black communities, it’s imperative to include more Habesha identity discourses within academic dialogues. One unique way to begin this process is to explore how Habesha identities and communities are represented, negotiated, and contested within and through the use of media in America.

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