

What is Black Identity?

In order to get a better understanding of why black identity exists and if there are universal commonalities, Kutloano Murphy discussed her personal experience as a black immigrant. She was born and raised in South Africa, and came to Canada eleven years ago at age fourteen. Based on this discussion, some conclusions about how black identity operates were made.

For Murphy, black identity is a political statement. In asking what it means to be black, she explains that in South Africa, apartheid defined how you were treated, “so if your parents were on the side where you couldn’t use certain fountains or do certain things or [were not] privileged to certain rights, then you were black”. By this, she means that race is a matter of a person’s social and legal status in the country. Defining blackness by these terms does feel familiar to the discrimination experienced in North America.

Murphy then explains how stereotypes about blackness inform the black identity. She describes how her peers in both South Africa and Canada have asked her why she acts white, “even when I’m just being myself”. By ‘acting white’, she means that certain interests, personality traits and vernacular are associated with black people and those who do not fit those stereotypes have assimilated to whiteness. These social pressures are reflected by how she portrays herself in different environments. When asked about her experience being a racial minority in Canada she explains that with white people, “I sometimes feel this pressure to entertain”. In contrast, she says with black Canadians, “I think I feel more comfortable in talking about social stuff”. Based on Murphy’s experience, the performative elements become just as important of an aspect of black identity as the person’s true nature. There is a need to comply

with the majority's perception of blackness and in doing so, this creates a need for community with other people who understand and relate to this marginalized characterization. Murphy confirms this by explaining why a community for black people is necessary. She emphasizes that, "it's important to recognize that there is a marginalized group that needs freedom to just be and express themselves". However, as Murphy explains further, it is clear that the dichotomy is not just black and white.

Depending on the cultural background she may relate differently to certain elements of the black identity. She explains that being an immigrant affects black identity since, "it's its own dynamic and it changes who you are and how you see the world and yourself". She also explains where people immigrate from matters, because "it's different, [the] conversations and connections you'll have with them". She means that although there are aspects of being black that are universal, social and political context still varies between countries.

It is not possible to prove whether black identity is truly universal based on one interview. However, determining commonalities and patterns between many individual experiences creates a broader understanding of why black identity exists and how it benefits the community.