



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 29, 2025

Black Professor: Time to Kill “African-American”

It was decades ago that I warned against using the term “African-American.” It was three years ago that legendary black singer Smokey Robinson said, passionately, “I *resent* being called an African-American — I really do.” Now a black Ivy League linguistics professor is echoing this sentiment. Saying the term is “awkward,” he’s touting the “back to ‘black’ by popular demand” position.

John McWhorter, associate professor of linguistics at Columbia University, made his comments in a Tuesday *New York Times* [op-ed](#). He also addressed the matter in a *Times* interview published the same day.



AP Images
John McWhorter

Reporting on the story, Newser [writes](#) that for McWhorter,

and he suspects a lot of others, the link to Africa has never felt right. The “African connection is too long ago. It’s too abstract,” he tells colleague David Leonhardt [in the *Times* interview]. “Italian American is one thing. Your mother, your grandmother speaks Sicilian, and you’re eating Italian food and you have a certain way of talking. There’s a whole culture.” Not so with most African Americans in that regard, he adds.

Plus, does it really make sense to use a label that technically includes white people who hail from various nations in Africa? “A term that is meant to be descriptive but that can refer to Cedric the Entertainer, Trevor Noah, Elon Musk and Zohran Mamdani is a little silly,” he writes.

I made [this point](#) back [in 2004](#), mind you. I explained that

the phrase African-American is also very imprecise when read literally. If I’m a Boer Afrikaner or an Arab North African who has immigrated to our nation and has been naturalized, am I an “African-American”? Strange, too, because you would think that adding a hyphen, a word and six syllables to a group’s description should make it more accurate, not less.

History of an Error

McWhorter also explained the dubious origins of the “African-American” language manipulation, that it was popularized by a notorious race hustler. As he also told Leonhardt:

Well, in 1988, when the Reverend Jesse Jackson had a massive influence on the black community, he basically declared that we need to start calling ourselves African-Americans rather than black because black was too crude in general to capture all the different shades



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that we are.... And so it happened very quickly if you were, you know, alive and mature at the time. It was as if all of a sudden one week you were supposed to say African-American rather than black. And you know, I never much liked it.

Neither did, once again, the aforementioned Smokey Robinson. Making [his comments in 2022](#) on *The View*, the then-82-year-old crooner said he has traveled the world. Yet, he emphasized, he has never even been to Africa. He proceeded to explain, "I think that when you do that [use "African-American"], you're disclaiming all the contributions that black people have made to America. You see, I consider myself to be a black American, and I enjoy being called black."

Robinson's perhaps most powerful point was that black American servicemen did not die for "Timbuktu or Cape Town or Kenya. They died for Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia and Louisiana and Texas and Virginia."

Dying for the Country — and Killing Patriotism?

In truth, using the term "African-American" is highly destructive, as I explained in 2004. "Many terms have been used to refer to black people," I began. Some "were meant to be pejorative or came to be seen as so and some weren't." Examples are "negro" and "colored," the former of which, Robinson pointed out in 2020, means "black" in Spanish. I then continued, writing that one quality all the terms shared, however,

was that they referred only to racial characteristics, not geographical area of origin. If you're a black American you're an American with dark skin and if you're a white American you're an American with light skin, but in either case the label attached to you indicates that you are of the American nation and culture. The term African-American is very different. It partially shifts the focus away from the land in which we live and toward a different part of the world. This is destructive and divisive because [many] black Americans already feel alienated from their nation, and this new label can only exacerbate this problem.

Still Missing the Point

This above passage gets at, too, why McWhorter actually doesn't go far enough. While his distinction between "African-American" and "Italian-American" is valid, it's still a mistake rubber stamping the latter. This point was made powerfully by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1915. In an address to the Knights of Columbus, he [stated](#):

There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism. When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans. Some of the very best Americans I have ever known were naturalized Americans, Americans born abroad. But a hyphenated American is not an American at all.

This is just as true of the man who puts "native" before the hyphen as of the man who puts German or Irish or English or French before the hyphen. Americanism is a matter of the spirit and of the soul. Our allegiance must be purely to the United States. We must unsparingly condemn any man who holds any other allegiance.

... The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling



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nationalities.

Now consider: Is this not what we're currently degenerating into?

Ironically, since [I just wrote about](#) black Americans moving to Africa yesterday, Roosevelt had something to say about such people. He said that those with even divided loyalties have "no place here." And the sooner such a person "returns to the land to which he feels his real heart-allegiance, the better it will be for every good American," he added.

Cultural Relativism Destroys

Unfortunately, the demeaning of mainstream American culture — and the outright denial of it as a reality — encourages hyphenated-Americanism. Just consider the results of these decades of "What does it really mean to be American?" agitation. "American culture" is now viewed as something nebulous. What is it? Who is to say? It's just as how, as many observers warn, not being willing to define "woman" erases women. If something, such as a sexual or cultural designation, can mean anything, it means nothing.

And people don't identify with nothing.

So without a well-defined American heritage to embrace, what are they left with?

Answer: Their ancestors' heritage.

Ergo, hyphenated (pseudo)Americanism.

[Rough Rider](#) Teddy must be spinning in his grave as America, demographically and culturally, spins out of control.

For those interested, the full interview with McWhorter is below.



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