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## The Future of the African American Past

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### ***From New Negro to Post-Black: Shifts in Black Identity***

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One can imagine a conversation between a recently migrated father and son in 1920s Harlem. While fingering his hand-written copy of poet Claude McKay's *If We Must Die*, the son says: "No more 'yes sir' to whitey and holding my head down. No more sitting in the back of the bus. No more picking cotton. I'm a black MAN. I'm going get an education, a good job, and a wife who I can protect. I'm going to fight for my rights as a Negro American and show the world what the Negro race has to offer. I'm a New Negro." A man of few words, the father says to his son: "They lynch new Negroes the same way they lynch old ones."

Seventy or eighty years later the son's great-grand son talks to his father and, while holding a copy of Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*, says: "Race is a social construction. I don't have to identify as black. I'm a man whose politics and opportunities are not bound by my racial identity. I don't need affirmative action to make it in America. I am not afraid to be post-black." Having inherited the trait of reticence from the men in his family, (and not having heard of Uber) the Harlem based father says, "Cab drivers still not gonna take you to Harlem or Bed-Sty (two New York City black neighborhoods)."

These two imaginary, yet realistic, conversations demonstrate the evolutionary nature of black identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An expression of black modernity, the New Negro movement reflected the hope of a people who were moving from rural to urban America, from peonage to full citizenship, and from espousing a philosophy of uplift through self-help to an embrace of uplift through civil rights protest. The end of century expression of post-blackness is indicative of the way some young black Americans are dealing with post-modernity. The election a black president, the immigration of millions of blacks, the advent of a global economy, has offered many American-born blacks alternative ways to self-identify. This brief talk will look at the evolutionary nature of black identity.