

UDC 316.356.4(=414/=45):94(73)"17/18"

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THE COMPLEXITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY AT THE INTERSECTION OF SPAIN, FRANCE, AND AN INCIPIENT UNITED STATES

Abstract. This article examines the construction and contestation of African American identity through the lens of historical memory, emphasizing the interconnected roles of Spain, France, and the early United States. Drawing on the concept of historical memory as a socially constructed narrative that shapes collective and national identity, the study argues that processes of remembering and erasure have profoundly influenced both the recognition of African American contributions and broader definitions of American belonging. It situates contemporary political efforts to narrow national identity through policies, legal decisions, and the suppression of Black history within a longer tradition of selective historical narration.

The author highlights the marginalization of Spain's role in the American Revolution and its intersection with the underrepresentation of African Americans. Through a detailed case study of Jane Henderson Bronner, a descendant of an enslaved woman freed through then Governor of Louisiana Bernardo de Gálvez' intervention, the paper illustrates how personal genealogies expose the transnational and multiracial foundations of the United States. This encounter reveals the entanglement of memory, identity, and recognition across time and space.

Ultimately, the article argues that African American identity cannot be fully understood within a purely national framework. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of Atlantic histories, shaped by colonial alliances, slavery, and the politics of memory. By recovering overlooked narratives, the study calls for a more inclusive understanding of American identity that acknowledges its global, multilingual, and multicultural origins.

Keywords: African American identity; historical memory; collective memory; national identity; Spain and the American Revolution; Bernardo de Gálvez; Jane Henderson Bronner; historical erasure; transnational history; race and citizenship; identity politics; memory and nationalism.

Historical memory is a concept that supposes making certain choices regarding what and how to remember as well as the recognition that what is remembered (and what is forgotten or erased) has an impact on national identity. Today, this process of selective remembrance is visible in the deliberate reshaping of public historical narratives: African Americans' contributions to the

United States and key elements of their history are currently being erased from federal sites such as national parks, military bases and museums.

In fact, as Angelo Villagomez, Mariam Rashid and Kendra Hughes argue “Through a multipronged strategy that includes purging diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, pushing for changes in school curricula, and censoring museum exhibits, the administration has implemented a series of orders to reduce access to public areas and censor and rewrite historical exhibits, particularly those targeting the history and impact of Black Americans on public lands” (Villagomez et al, 2026). Unfortunately, as the authors point out, this erasure, despite the aggressivity which characterizes many of the current iconoclastic administration’s moves, is not new. Those African Americans whose contributions have been recognized all had to fight long and hard for that recognition, making the current rollbacks that much more devastating.

It isn’t just African Americans who are being once again excluded from the category of true Americans. The question of American identity is becoming increasingly narrow and tinged with religious, ethnic and even linguistic litmus tests which generations had sought to remove from the definition of who belongs. On September 8, 2025, in the case *Noem v. Vasquez-Perdomo*, the Supreme Court’s “shadow docket” declared in a 6-3 decision that factors such as speaking Spanish, accented English or “apparent race or ethnicity” are legitimate reasons for suspicion that a person is illegally in the US and therefore may be detained and questioned by immigration officers. Additionally, a bill proposed on December 1, 2025 by Senator Bernie Moreno (Republican of Ohio, born in Colombia) entitled “Exclusive Citizenship Act of 2025” would prohibit dual citizenship for U.S. citizens who would therefore be forced to renounce their U.S. citizenship to keep one or more others.

But if national narratives always have an element of mythmaking, the efforts to shape how the nation is viewed inside and out don’t wait for some new radical regime to make sweeping changes in it, these narratives begin immediately, or even in media res. In the national discourse around autonomy (a necessary concomitant to narratives of liberation from the yoke of foreign powers) we see how the myths of sovereignty and national identity are constructed. For example, Charles de Gaulle in his famous speech upon the liberation of Paris on August 25, 1944 strategically omitted the key role of the Allies (“Paris! Paris outragé! Paris brisé! Paris martyrisé! Mais Paris libéré! Libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France, avec l'appui et le concours de la France tout entière, de la France qui se bat, de la seule France, de la vraie France, de la France éternelle.” / “Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, liberated by its people, with the help of the armies of France, with the support and co-operation of the whole of France, the France that fights, the only France, the true France, the eternal France!”). Acknowledging France’s deep dependance on the United States and Great Britain in the time of its greatest vulnerability is not nearly as good a story as that of France liberating itself.

Similarly, the contribution of Spain to the birth of the United States, as well as that of African-Americans, has been strategically erased for fairly clear reasons related in part to the popularity of the figure of the French general, the Marquis de Lafayette who was very close to George Washington and much better known in the United States than Bernardo de Gálvez, the Spanish military leader and governor of Spanish Louisiana. The erasure of the latter’s role and emphasis on that of the former in the narrative of the United States’ fight for independence is also a consequence to the perceived prestige of being helped by France, home of the Enlightenment

rather than by Spain, a country whose reputation was still suffering from the effects of the “Black Legend”.

Some of the complexities around these issues came to the fore on September 19 and 20th, 2025 at a symposium entitled “Spain and the Birth of American Democracy” held at the stately Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Constitution Hall in Washington DC, just a few blocks from the White House. Co-organized by the DAR, the Fundación Ramón Areces and the Queen Sofía Spanish Institute, the symposium was designed to right a historical wrong: namely, the lack of recognition in the United States of Spain’s role in fending off British troops during the American Revolution. Throughout the two-day conference, scholars spoke about the contributions of Bernardo de Gálvez in the American struggle, analyzing both the geopolitical objectives of Spain as well as the reasons why this collaboration has been seldom celebrated in the US.



Jane Henderson Bronner explains that her ancestor benefitted from manumission by Bernardo de Gálvez to Queen Sofía of Spain at DAR Constitution Hall in Washington DC, Sep 19, 2025.

Yet, the most dramatic moment of the symposium stemmed not from one of the scholarly talks but from an impromptu and historic meeting between Queen Sofía of Spain and an African American woman with a fascinating story to tell. On the second and final day of the symposium, Dr. Richard Kagan, a distinguished emeritus History professor at Johns Hopkins University, directly addressed Queen Sofía (mother of King Felipe VI) in his talk on the “erasure” of Spain’s role in aiding the Americans during the Revolutionary War. It was at the end of this speech that Jane Henderson Bronner, accompanied by family members, approached the Queen in the audience and began to speak to her as a small crowd gathered to hear what she had to say.

Through tears, she explained that she is the descendant of Mathieu Devaux, a French merchant who served in the New Orleans militia during the Revolutionary War under Governor Bernardo de Gálvez. Gálvez is credited with contributing significantly to the war effort by forming a battalion that defeated the British in two key battles in Florida and Louisiana and by providing critical aid to American troops such as weapons, ammunition and cattle. Henderson Bronner went on to explain how her great-great grandmother, Agnes Mathieu, was an enslaved person and the

wife of Mathieu Devaux. After 30 years of research, her brother Michael (also present) discovered that Gálvez personally signed the manumission document by which her enslaved ancestor was freed. Mrs. Henderson Bronner expressed her gratitude to the Spanish state (as represented by Queen Sofía), since her enslaved ancestor never had the chance to do so. Following her emotional speech, which the Queen who speaks English fluently listened to attentively, the two embraced.

What is truly striking about this moment is how it encapsulates the complexities of identity in colonial America as well as today when loyalties, rights, and the struggle for historical memory preservation collide. Henderson Bronner is an African American descendant of an enslaved woman and a Frenchman who fought alongside Spaniards, American colonists and enslaved people for a Spaniard (who governed a huge territory ceded to Spain by France later to be incorporated into the United States). Her membership in the Daughters of the American Revolution serves, as it does for other African American members who fought to be accepted in this association, as validation of her deep connections to a key historical moment in US history.

And yet, it was Spain that freed her ancestor, not the United States. To what nation did Agnes owe greater allegiance? We do not know the nature of her relationship with the Frenchman whose children she bore, nor whether he had a sense of national belonging, but her life was clearly deeply marked by marginality as were the lives of her descendants.

Today, as larger battles play out over historical memory, something both Spain struggles with as regards the Franco regime, the meaning of including Spain's role in the American Revolution dovetails with Henderson Bronner's efforts at recognition of her own identity, linked as it is to three continents: Africa, Europe and North America. There are thousands more just like Henderson Bronner, who likely unbeknownst to them are ancestors of enslaved people with links to revolutionary fighters or who fought themselves and whose lives were touched by foreign intervention in favor of the United States.

In some ways, it was ironically fitting for the question of recognition to come up at the end of a conference whose entire purpose was to demonstrate how Spain's contribution to the birth of America has gone largely unnoticed (as Dr. Kagan particularly pointed out, for over a century few books were written on this topic and to this day it is little taught in American schools). This impromptu act of connection across the centuries – below the gilded Constitution Hall's stage – reflected the difficulty to make heard many voices which have been left out of the story of the birth of the United States. Not coincidentally, up until 1976, the DAR did not recognize any person of color's ancestral links to revolutionary soldiers, thus keeping them symbolically and literally outside. Henderson Bronner's final poignant statement, "I too am a daughter of the American Revolution," points to this past policy of erasure, giving a voice to the thousands before her who were denied one. Like that of Latinos whose ancestors can have ties to three different continents and as many nations, and despite decades of efforts to combat such marginalization, African Americans' sense of belonging remains contested, a fact underscored by the fragility and scarcity of their political representation in the United States Congress from which all four current Black Republican representatives have just announced their departure.

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