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## **What It Means To Be American**

## **Betting the House on an Ideal**



David Hammons, *America the Beautiful* (1968) © David Hammons. Courtesy the Oakland Museum of California

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As we celebrate the Fourth of July and the anniversary of American independence, I find myself reflecting on what it means to be an American, especially in light of a historic election year and an increasingly fractured political climate. According to a recent article on the Public Broadcasting System's (PBS) website, entitled "What does it mean to be American?", the answer depends on your politics.

The author outlines how the country is not only divided along political lines (i.e., Republican v. Democrat), but also on the question of what constitutes American identity. According to the article, Democrats favor diversity and openness to refugees and other immigrants as central components of being American, while Republicans are far more likely to cite a culture grounded in Christian beliefs and the traditions of early European immigrants as essential to identity in the United States. Those factions have seen their competing visions of American identity brought to a boil at points throughout history, but things have become particularly tense in the current political landscape, as debates over race, police brutality, immigration and the welcoming of refugees remain hotly contested.

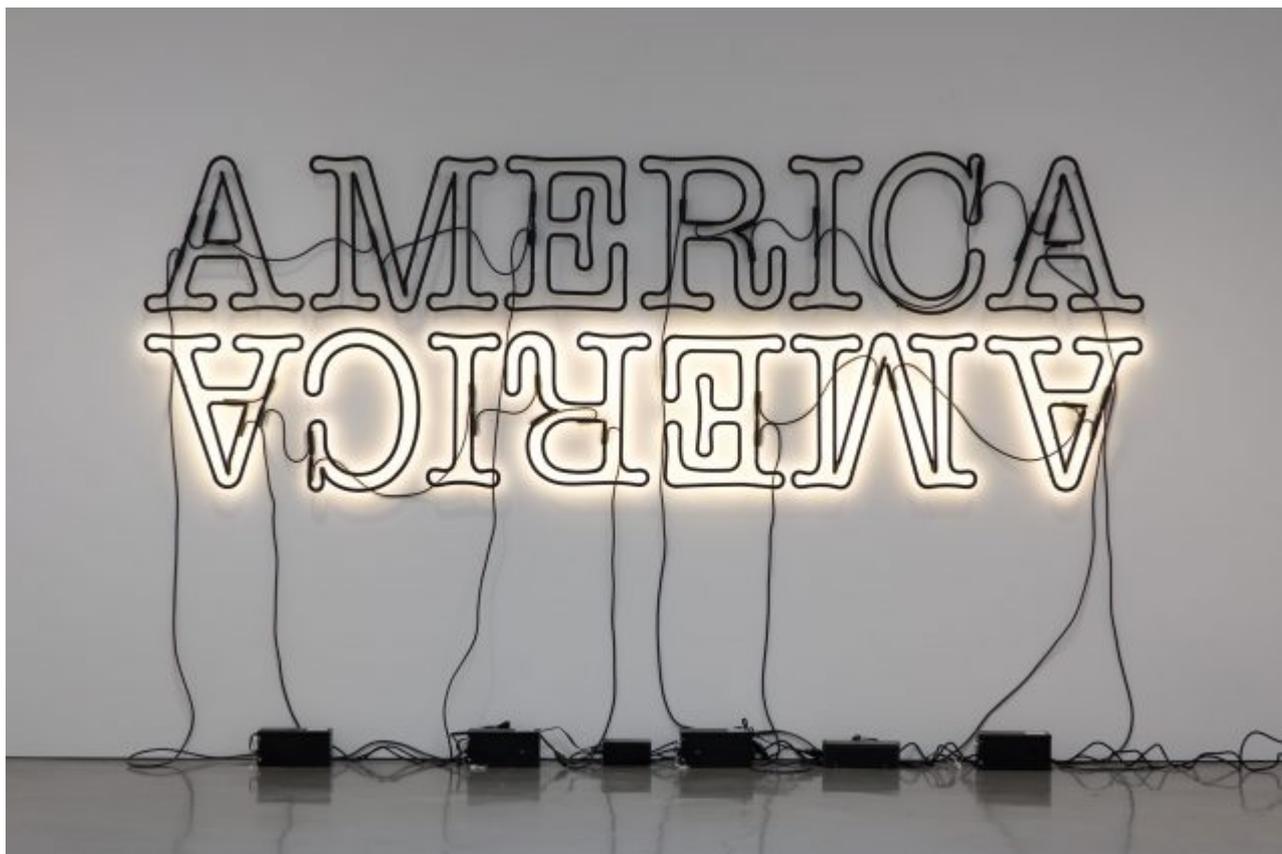
So, in this context, what does it mean to be American? Immediately, I think of opportunity and its conditions; solidarity and individuality; hard work; a desire for hunger to end; and racial inequity. When I think of the word "American", I think of potential; of endless possibility; of an idealized promise to think progressively; to act humanely; to be true to democratic ideals. I think of Lyle Ashton Harris's *Miss America* (1987-88), a photograph in which the artist used portraiture to interrogate issues of representation. The subject, sitting for a formal studio portrait, is shown in whiteface, wrapped in an American flag. The transformation of black skin to white with the application of thick, ghostly makeup, the cloaking of the figure in the flag and the exposed breasts are all politically charged, symbolic gestures that offer a pointed critique of race, sexuality and gender in the U.S.



Lyle Ashton Harris, *Miss America* (1987-88). Courtesy California African American Museum

“American” means anyone who makes a meaningful contribution to our country regardless of their skin color, sexual orientation, gender, age or occupation—and regardless of the language they speak or where they were born. “American” means giving everyone the opportunity to make their dreams come true. “American” means an eclectic range of opinions and ideas and an ongoing conversation about what’s right and, especially, what’s wrong.

Being American means reconciling with the reality that in 2016, police killed at least 258 African Americans; 34% of the total number of unarmed people killed were black males, which is alarmingly disproportionate since black men make up only 6% of the U.S. population. I think of David Hammons’ *America the Beautiful* (1968) a striking “body print” that the artist made early in his career, soon after his arrival to Los Angeles in 1963. To create this print, Hammons made impressions of his own face, arms and torso by covering his body with oil or margarine, pressing it against a sheet of paper and then sprinkling pigment on the surface. He then used lithography to add the American flag that envelops the central figure. The assertive combination of a patriotic symbol with the body of a black man (the artist) underscores the heightened racial tensions in the U.S. during this period.



Glenn Ligon, *Double America 2* (2014) © Glenn Ligon. Courtesy the artist, Luhring Augustine, New York, Regen Projects, Los Angeles, and Thomas Dane Gallery, London

To be from America is to hope, to travel, to accept the good and to fight collectively for human rights because it is the responsibility of every American to speak loudly against injustice, to make sacrifices in the name of advancing equality and to hold the country to the promises laid out in the Constitution. I think of Glenn Ligon’s *Double America 2* (2014), a large neon sculpture illuminating the word “America.” The top row of letters in this work are painted black, such that the viewer sees only the illuminated backs of the letters reflecting off the wall. The bottom row depicts the word upside down. This arrangement of skewed perspectives evokes the political turmoil caused by the election of America’s first black president, Barack Obama, and the country’s involvement in multiple wars.

America, for me, is not a piece of land nor a collection of states unified under one flag. America is a collection of ideals. At the foundation of those ideals is equality of opportunity. The idea that everybody—no matter where you’ve come from, culturally, ethnically or otherwise—has the chance to create for themselves a free life. To be an American is to bet the house on that ideal.