

# How To Be Black

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## How To Be Black

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### Book Summary

Drawn from more than 30 years of living and redefining blackness, an editor at *The Onion* presents this tongue-in-cheek guide to being black that pokes fun at the so-called experts, purists and racists who think they know what black people believe, do, stand for and like.

*Note: Book excerpts are provided by the publisher and may contain language some find offensive.*

## Excerpt: How To Be Black

### Chapter One: Where Did You Get That Name?

Barry. Barrington. Baracuda. Bartuna. Bartender. Bartunda. Bartholomew. Bart. Baritone. Baritone Dave. Baranthunde. Bar—. Brad.

This is a representative sample of the world's attempts to say or recreate my name. For the record, it's Baratunde (baa-ruh-TOON-day).

I've trained for decades in the art of patiently waiting for people to butcher my name. It's often a teacher or customer service official who has to read aloud from a list. I listen to them breeze through Daniel and Jennifer and even Dwayne, but inevitably, there's a break in their rhythm. "James! Carrie! Karima! Stephanie! Kevin!" Pause. "Bar—." Pause. They look around the room, and then look back at their list. Their confidence falters. The declarative tone applied to the names before mine gives way to a weak, interrogative stumbling:

Barry? Barrington? Baracuda? Bartuna? Bartender? Bar-tunda? Bartholomew? Bart?  
Baritone? Baritone Dave? Baranthunde? Bar—? Brad!!

The person who called me Brad was engaged in the most lazy and hilarious form of wishful thinking, but all the others kind of, sort of, maybe make some sense. This experience is so common in my life that I now entirely look forward to it. Like a child on Christmas morning who hasn't yet been told that Santa is a creation of consumer culture maintained by society to extend the myth of "economic growth," I eagerly await the gift of any new variation the next person will invent. Can I get a Beelzebub? Who will see a Q where none exists? How about some numbers or special characters? Can I get a hyphen, underscore, forward slash? Only after letting the awkward process run its public course do I step forward, volunteering myself as the bearer of the unpronounceable label and correct them: "That's me. It's Baratunde."

I love my name. I love people's attempts to say it. I love that everyone, especially white people, wants to know what it means. So here's the answer:

My full name is Baratunde Rafiq Thurston. It's got a nice flow. It's global. I like to joke that "Baratunde" is a Nigerian name that means "one with no nickname." "Rafiq" is Arabic for "really, no nickname," and "Thurston" is a British name that means "property of Massa Thurston."

In truth, Baratunde is derived from the very common Yorubwa Nigerian name, "Babatunde." A literal translation comes out something like "grandfather returns" but is often interpreted as "one who is chosen." Rafiq is Arabic for "friend or companion." And Thurston, well, that really, probably, is the name of the white guy that owned my people back in the day.

Of all the groups of people who react to my name, I've found that white people are the most curious about its meaning and origin. Upon hearing of its origin, they want to know when I last visited Nigeria. Other non-black people are nearly as curious, assuming "Baratunde" to be a family name that goes back generations, that was passed to me

through a series of meticulously traceable Biblical begats. Black Americans, on the other hand, rarely even pause to ponder my name. Considering how inventive black Americans have been with their own names, that's not very surprising.

Where I never expected any particular reaction, however, was from Nigerians themselves. Nigerians have very strong opinions about my name. They don't like it, and they want me to know.

Constantly.

I call this phenomenon The Nigerian Name Backlash. Rarely does a week go by without a Nigerian somewhere on the Internet finding and interrogating me. I first encountered the NNB when I was near twelve years old. I called my Nigerian friend, who went by "Tunde," on the phone, but he wasn't home. Instead, his *extremely* Nigerian father answered, and our interaction proceeded

as follows:

"Hello, who is calling?"

"Hi sir, this is Baratunde."

"Where did you get that name!?"

Let's pause the exchange right here, because you need more context. Father Nigeria did not simply ask where I got the name as one might ask, "Oh, where did you get those shoes? They're really nice. They're so nice that I need to know where you got them so I can possibly get myself a pair." No, that was not the tone. The tone was more along the lines of "Who the hell do you think you are coming into my house, stealing my gold, priceless family jewels, my dead grandmother's skeleton, my porridge, and attempting to walk out through the front door as if I would not notice? By all rights, I should kill you where you stand, you thieving, backstabbing boy."

Shocked by the question, but determined to be both honest and respectful, I answered.

"I got it from my parents," I told him.\*

"Do you even know what it means?" Father Nigeria asked me in the same way you might ask a dog, "What model iPad do you want?" Fortunately, I knew exactly what it meant, and I proudly answered, "It means grandfather returns or one who is chosen."

He reacted swiftly and loudly. "No! It means grandfather returns or one who is chosen."

As I was about to explain to him that I'd just said the very same thing, he launched into a tirade: "This is the problem with you so-called

African-Americans. You have no history, no culture, no roots. You think you can wear a dashiki, steal an African name, and become African? You cannot!"

Remember, when this self-appointed Father Nigeria decided to indict, judge, and reject all of African America for its attempts to rebuild some small part of the ancestral bridges burned by

America's peculiar institution, I was twelve years old and not in the best position to argue that maybe he should calm down and stop acting like a bully.

His reaction stunned me, but it also prepared me for the regular onslaught from members of the Nigerian Name Backlash community. While he made a sweeping dis against all black Americans who sought cultural identification with Africa, most other Nigerians I've encountered have more technical complaints. Every few weeks a new batch finds me on the Internet, usually Twitter, and swarms with the same basic set of questions and challenges:

"Are you Nigerian?" they excitedly ask.

"No. My parents just wanted me to have an African name."

"You know your name is Nigerian right?"

"Yes."

"But it is wrong, your name. What is this 'Baratunde'? You mean '*Babatunde*' right?"

"No."

"Where did you get that name?"

Sigh.

My name has served as a perfect window through which to examine my experience of blackness. For non-blacks, it marks me as absolutely, positively black. However, most of the vocal Nigerians I've met (which is to say, most of the Nigerians I've met) use my name to remind me that I'm not *that* black.

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