Chapter 5

Negotiating the Boundaries of American Blackness: The Experiences of African Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

African students in the United States are assigned a racial identity ‘Black’ in accordance with racial stratifications of the U.S. society. This designation makes it necessary for them to negotiate the structural constructions of American Blackness. Guided by social constructivism, the author explored African students’ negotiation of Black racial solidarity. African students’ racial solidarity was embedded within shared perspectives of common fate, which provided a reference for collective Black identity but, however, did not culminate into strong racial in-group loyalty. African students’ racial solidarity was mitigated by the desire to exonerate themselves from inherent Black stereotypes. This was exacerbated by their non-prototypic cultural characteristics, which, according to native-born counterparts, rendered them ‘illegitimate’ in-group members. The increasing presence of foreign-born Black students unveils both commonalities and heterogeneity among Black student populations, which scholars of Black Studies must reflect upon to explore ideological standpoints of Blackness.

INTRODUCTION

Inevitably, researchers of qualitative studies are often part of the research endeavor rather than being mere objective observers. It is, therefore, important that researchers disclose their own positionalities in the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In writing this chapter, I found it worthwhile to acknowledge my personal biography, which greatly influenced me to conduct research on African international students’ conceptualization and negotiation of American Blackness.

My personal experiences as a Black African student and later, African immigrant greatly influenced me to conduct a study of this nature. I sojourned to the United States from Zimbabwe in my early 30s to

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pursue graduate studies. Given that I was raised in a racially homogeneous community, my perspectives of race and racial relationships were significantly changed upon arrival in the United States. I became more aware of my racial identity, not to say I was previously unaware; rather, my Blackness was constantly brought to my consciousness. My five-year stay as a Black African student at a predominantly White institution of higher learning exposed me to the realities of what it means to be Black in the United States. I got to experience firsthand (or probably just a glimpse of it) of what I had read about racial stratifications in the United States. This personal experience on racial relationships stimulated me to pursue studies on African students’ conceptualization and negotiation of American Blackness.

During the last two years of my graduate studies, I volunteered to serve as an executive board member of the Association of Black Graduate and Professional Students (ABGPS), an organization virtually dominated by African American graduate students. The organization had more than 50 registered members, of which only two were Africans. Being an executive member of ABGPS enabled me to foster close relationships with African Americans, who in turn felt more comfortable to share their perspectives and personal experiences with me. At that same time, I was also actively involved with an African students’ organization that was predominantly constituted by graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa. The two student organizations shared a commonality in historical experiences and challenges, all directly or indirectly linked to perpetual European domination. Interestingly, there were also fundamental differences between the two student organizations. It turned out that ABGPS was a discursive space for Black identity expression, where African American students organized and deliberated on challenges they faced in their quest for recognition and equality in contexts of perceived racial prejudicial attitudes against Blacks. On the contrary, the African students’ organization was a forum through which members shared views on political, social, and economic challenges facing contemporary Africa.

In view of these commonalities and apparent differences between the two Black student organizations, the complexity of Blackness in the U.S. context became apparent to me. I found myself asking several questions on racial identity from the perspective of a Black international student. What really does it mean to be Black in the United States? As a Black international student, how much does Blackness define my own identity? Do I subscribe to the same sense of Black consciousness as Black Americans? Who owns Blackness in the first place? I also fathomed what would happen if the two organizations had merged into one; how would the students interact? Would that change their agendas? With these and many more unanswered questions, I embarked on studying how Black African students conceptualized and negotiated the Black racial identity.

BACKGROUND

Available records show that an estimated 68 Africans had sojourned to United States for studying purposes by the beginning of the 20th century (Laosebikan, 2012). A drastic change, however, occurred in the 1970s, which saw an estimated 7,000 Africans studying in the United States, constituting about 5.6% of the total international student population (Laosebikan, 2012). According to Arthur (2001), early groups of African students provided the nucleus for African immigrant communities due to repressive immigration laws at the time. The number of African students at U.S. universities continued to steadily
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