African-Born Female Academics in the U.S.: Experiences of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Access - Building Careers on Marginalized Identities

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ABSTRACT

This paper was based, in part, on some findings related to the intersection of identity and career outcomes for some African-born female academics located in the United States. In the phenomenological study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and revealed accounts of race and gendered challenges in their experiences. However, even though they faced similar kinds of marginalization as other Black and foreign women, these participants were confronted with unique questions of identification and experiences of double discrimination. Nonetheless, the findings also suggest a persistence that was reflected in their stories of access, inclusion, and exclusion as well as their perceived role as coalition-builders. An implication for immigrant female professors in the U.S. is that their immigrant status could both facilitate as well as challenge their career paths and economic outcomes, a point equally corroborated by research on gender and migration in higher education in Europe and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS

African American, Career Outcomes, Double Discrimination, Female Academics, Female Professors, Foreign-Born, Identity, Immigrants, Marginalization, Phenomenology, Qualitative Study, Resiliency

INTRODUCTION

In the much-renowned nation of immigrants, the dynamics of immigration continues to be contested. Not only does the U.S. Census Bureau depict significant increases in the foreign-born or immigrant population, it provides more granular analysis of the makeup of the foreign-born population by geography, socioeconomics and language ability, etc. (Gambino, Trevelyan, & Fitzwater, 2014). At the same time, the racial categorizations of the U.S. population have been rendered more complex with the introduction of multiple race combinations in the 2010 Census. No longer are the metaphors of melting pot, tossed salad or mosaics sufficient to describe the heightened diversities. With the focus of this paper being on a subset of the foreign-born, it is important to set in context what the census numbers show – or fail to show – and what this means for the people who occupy those spaces, the African-born, and more specifically, African-born female academics.

The 2000 U.S. Census Bureau reports that there were 33.5 million foreign-born peoples in the nation, representing 11.7% of the total U.S. population. Of this number, the largest percentage came from Latin America (53.3%) while the foreign-born from Africa were subsumed in the category “Other,” part of the 8% of total foreign-born. Comparatively therefore, other descriptors for the native-born and foreign-born could not necessarily capture many of the characteristics of African-born immigrants – that is, until more recently. For instance, when educational attainment was described,
the foreign-born, Age 25 and up, were less likely to have a high school diploma compared to 87.5% in the native-born population. Yet, among those with bachelor’s degree or higher, 27.3% were foreign-born, not statistically different from the 27.2% that were native-born (Larsen, 2004; Schmidley, 2002). For researchers studying these figures, these numbers were not telling the entirety of the stories or experiences of the African-born.

By 2000, the 250,000 foreign-born Blacks that were living in the U.S. in 1970 had increased to 2.2 million. Within the next decade, the number of foreign-born black immigrants had again doubled to nearly 4 million. In the 2010 census data, the foreign-born population had increased to approximately 40 million, nearly 13% of the total U.S. population (Grieco et al., 2012). While it had been easy to note the large percentage of immigrants that were from Latin America—nearly 53%, there was now a need to differentiate and understand better the rest of the foreign-born population. Black immigrants drew particular attention, especially for the differences and similarities between immigrant or foreign-born blacks and native-born blacks. Consequently, in the 2010 U.S. Census report, it was noted that even though the foreign-born from Africa constituted only 4% of the total foreign-born population, they had a higher level of educational attainment (41%) than the overall foreign-born educational attainment at 28%.

The question therefore had to be asked about who the foreign black immigrants in the U.S. were and where they were coming from (Alfred, 2001; 2002; Showers, 2015). As previously noted, earlier U.S. Census reports did not portray them fully and one had to parse out the foreign-born Blacks from the general “Other” category. Reflecting the complexity of race and geographical identifications in the U.S., more recent data and analysis have yielded more definitive figures of black immigrants in the U.S. Of the total black population in the U.S., 9% are immigrants (triple what it was in 1980) and projected to grow to 16.5% by 2060 (Anderson, 2015). African-born Blacks are reportedly driving this growth whereas in the U.K., Black is inclusive of South Asian minorities (Ali, Mirza, Phoenix, & Ringrose, 2010; Bhopal, 2011).

The intersections of race, national origins, and identity are getting even more complicated by the surging increase in foreign-born Blacks in the U.S. The point being highlighted here is that the Black population in the U.S. has always been diverse with noteworthy implications for the African-born, as will be described later.

Ultimately, these statistics are important to understand in the context of African immigrants to the U.S. Their accounts and experiences which seemed to have been lost in the larger stories of U.S. immigration were being surfaced. With more detailed data, a better picture emerges highlighting old misrepresentations and formulating newer analysis. The labor force and educational attainment figures with a prevailing account that native-born Americans were more likely to have high school diplomas than the foreign-born could not then explain the difference when the foreign-born black numbers were introduced into the picture. More qualitative explanations were needed to explain the fact that while 27% of the foreign-born had a bachelor’s degree or higher, yet, of those with this educational attainment among the foreign-born, 40.3% were from Africa, while 48.5% were from Asia (Bidesh & Kposowa, 2012), or that Black immigrant enrollment in Ivy League schools exacerbated the divide between Blacks (Carroll, 2007). Conversely, it could be stated that newer census data were beginning to catch up with accounts in literature regarding immigrants from Africa.

BLACK IMMIGRANTS IN THE U.S.

The full history of voluntary and involuntary migration of Africans into the U.S. is certainly beyond the scope of this study but suffice it to say that the presence of contemporary or more recent (1970-present) Black immigrants is not without contention. Equally, there are implications for their personal, economic, and career outcomes (Osirim, 2008). Particularly because their presence in the U.S. elicits an intra-group difference with American-born Blacks, issues of identity are elicited resulting in further marginalization as immigrants, Africans, and women (Nkabinde, 2004; Turner,
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