

Storying Our Experiences: Caribbean Students at U.S Universities

Dyanis Popova

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Gresilda A. Tilley-Lubbs, Chair

Jim Garrison

Silvia M. Bénard Calva

Samuel R. Cook

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative research project, I explore the daily lived experiences of five Caribbean students studying at a rural university in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I investigate the personal challenges encountered by young adult Caribbean students and focus on their perspectives and coping strategies as they negotiate the racial binary and sociocultural norms found in the United States. I present my research here in two manuscripts. In manuscript one, *Transcultural Adaptations: Caribbean Students at U.S. Universities*, framed both by my use of testimonio as method (Haig-Brown, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2009) and the composite lens formed by my use of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012), I look at how all these factors influence their academic experiences and their perception and performance of the Self. In doing so, I highlight key aspects of the community experience and add to the conversation surrounding the adaptation of international students to U.S. universities.

In manuscript two *Interrogating Whiteness: The View from Outside*, I delve more deeply into one aspect of their adaptation by interrogating one participant's perspectives on whiteness. I use critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), and the call-and-response tradition (Hebdige, 1987; Toussaint, 2009) common in Trinidad & Tobago and in the African diaspora to present my exploration of his perspectives. I present his perspectives using the third person voice, followed by an examination of my own ways of knowing, to highlight the questioning and internal conflict that emerged as a result of these conversations on whiteness. I share my

epiphanic experience (Denzin, 2013; 2014) in the hopes of establishing discourse and resonance with my reader in this deconstruction of my way of understanding the world.

Dedication

To my son, Aaryan, who has helped me find strength and determination when my focus was challenged. Your resiliency and joy in the little things have refreshed my love of life and learning, and continue to inspire me on this journey.

To my ancestors, living and having lived. Your sacrifices and personal journeys have paved the way for the realization of my dreams.

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I thank Kestrel Smith, a friend and colleague, for the informal discussions that lead to my “discovery” of transcultural theory, which was instrumental in the formation of my theoretical framework.

I thank my parents for their love, strength, and support in this endeavor. They allowed me to dream big and convinced me that I could achieve anything. My mother, Diana Copper-Kelly, has been my greatest champion. My step-mother, Deborah Conrad, has been a sounding board for all my ideas and I am grateful for her continued patience and willingness to listen and question. My father, Dennis Conrad, has been my mentor and inspiration. Without his encouragement, I would never have pursued a Ph.D. in education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Caribbean Students at U.S. Universities: Becoming Visible

The United States hosts about 21% of all the international students across the globe, more than any other country (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014).

International students can be differentiated from conventional immigrants primarily on their status as sojourners (Martin & Harrell, 1996). Unlike immigrants, who intend to establish permanent residency, these students are granted visas to complete academic or vocational programs with the understanding that their stay in the United States is temporary. They are often actively recruited by numerous academic and non-academic programs (World Education Services [WES], 2012) because they are a source of both financial benefits and intellectual capital for the university, and because they add a much sought-after layer of diversity to the campus environment (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

The number of international students in the United States has been steadily increasing, and as of July 2014, there were over 950,000 international students on F and M visas¹, an 8% increase from the previous year and an over 200% increase during the last decade alone (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Over 200,000 additional students are here on J-1 exchange visas, which grant them status as non-immigrant visitors participating in work-and-study based programs (U.S. State Department, 2015). Research involving international students is limited, and mostly

¹ F-1 and M-1 visas are conferred to foreign nationals seeking non-immigrant student status in the United States. The former refers to those pursuing a full academic program of study while the latter refers to those attending a vocational or non-academic program. Students in both categories are required to maintain a residence abroad and are expected to prove the availability of sufficient funding for all study before being granted their visas. They are also prohibited from working off-campus except for various forms of practical training, which require an additional application process (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [U.S.C.I.S], 2016).

looks at psychosocial or psychocultural adjustment (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008; Galloway & Jenkins, 2009; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Morgan & O'Garro, 2008; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). With 75% of all students who enter the United States on F and M visas coming from Asian countries (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [U.S.I.C.E], 2014), much of the research that has taken place centers on nationals from this geographic region (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Lin & Yi, 1997; Wong, 2004). Only 1.2% of international students come from Caribbean countries, with the largest numbers originating from the Bahamas, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago (IIE, 2014). Due to their relatively small numbers, students from the Caribbean are rarely included in these studies.

Current research on Caribbean persons in the United States centers on first and second generation immigrants (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014). Many of these studies focus on the assimilation of individuals and families into U.S. social, cultural, and political norms (Benson, 2006; Drakes, 2002; Guy, 2001; Ostine, 1998; Rogers, 2000; Sutton, 1992; Waters, 1991). Despite the limited research specifically referring to students from the Caribbean, much of the data collected on the experiences of Caribbean immigrants is relatable to the experiences of international students, as these persons share a common background and similar experiences upon entry into the United States.

The students whose perspectives I discuss here, have their “feet in two worlds” (Matthews, 2014, p. xvii), and have emerged as hybrids and transnationals due to the fluidity of their connections, the ease of modern communication, and the mobility of financial and human capital between their home and host countries. Upon arrival,

Caribbean nationals are automatically included in the normative racial binary in the United States based on the rule of hypodescent (Spickard, 1996), the one drop rule, which can influence all other aspects of their lives. Within this “rule”, all it takes is one black ancestor for an individual to be considered black. This perspective not only separates people into the black/white binary despite various cultural, linguistic, and religious differences (Guy, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Perea, 2009), but also ignores the existence of numerous other ethnic groups. In this system, everyone is positioned or positions the Self in relation to whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

As Caribbean students are often unwittingly and unwillingly assigned established racial and ethnic roles based on the racial binary found in the United States, and ideologically absorbed into the U.S. population, the uniqueness or even the existence of their academic and psychosocial needs is frequently ignored or unrecognized (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014). In fact, in order to achieve academic and social success, they are often faced with numerous choices, both conscious and unconscious, which can influence not only their experiences in the United States, but also their impending returns to their home countries.

The Research Focus

With this research, I intend to deepen the discussion among educators and administrators at institutions of higher education as they strive to provide positive experiences to their international student population. I explore the academic and sociocultural lives of international students from the Caribbean and intentionally discuss both types of experiences as learning encompasses both academic and social contexts. Particularly for young adults, the academic and social worlds are intertwined and a

positive or negative impact on one will often transfer to the other (Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Wortham, 2006).

I came to this study from my own experiences as an international student navigating the landscape of my new, and what I then thought was a temporary, home. My perception of who I was and what that meant to those around me was continually challenged and re-shaped before I was even aware what was taking place. It has been a long journey to reclaim and restate my ways of knowing and understanding the world. That journey has led to me desiring a deeper understanding of the process of cultural adaptation and its effects on the living and learning experiences of individuals and of their communities. As almost twenty years have passed since my arrival to the United States, this new generation faces different experiences and challenges. By exploring their experiences and ways of knowing and understanding the world, I intend to highlight an often overlooked population in an effort to encourage recognition and additional support from faculty, staff, and the general university population.

The Study

The Context

I conducted a qualitative research study on a university campus in Hillridge, Virginia², a center for diversity within a rural community. The county in which the university is located has been estimated to have just over 98,000 residents, more than triple the population of three of the neighboring five counties, and it is the largest population in the area (Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, 2016). The population in the region is 93% white, 3% black, 2% Latino, with 2% identified as other, and it is showing continued growth among Asian and Latino populations. More than one-third of

² Name of places and participants have been changed.

the residents earn less than \$25,000 per year and the number of households under the poverty line is almost double the state average (Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, 2011).

The Town of Hillridge administrative webpage notes that more than half of the county's residents live in Hillridge itself and that more than half of that number are university students. According to the university website, the university has over 30,000 enrolled students, more than 25,000 of whom are undergraduates. 65% of students identify as white, 4% as black, 5% as Hispanic, and 8% as Asian. Foreign nationals make up 11% of the university population. The university community is primarily responsible for the increased diversity, relative to surrounding communities. Recognizing the change in the makeup of the students, staff, and faculty, the university has taken steps to actively address diversity and inclusion. The center for international students is the first point of contact for new arrivals and was recently included as part of the main campus.

Participants in this study are residents of Caribbean countries and have all lived there for the majority of their lives. Four participants were foreign-born students on F-1 visas and the fifth was born in the United States to Caribbean parents and had lived in the Caribbean from the age of three.

Table 1 <i>Introducing the participants</i>					
Participants & Country of Origin	Immigration Status	Age	Class Level	Major	Home language
Julio (Trinidad & Tobago)	F-1	23	4 th year	Engineering	English
Jared (Haiti)	F-1	25	2 nd year	Agriculture	French
Kent (Barbados)	U.S. Citizen	22	2 nd year	Engineering	English
Sita (Belize)	F-1	18	3 rd year	Engineering	English/Spanish
Noro (Jamaica)	F-1	18	1 st year	Engineering	English

Data Collection

I collected data on the university campus during the fall semester. I audio-recorded and transcribed the initial interview. I then met weekly with each participant for an informal conversation in a location of his/her choice. At the end of the semester, I organized a talking circle (Jennings, Tan, & Gandarilla, 2015; Wilbur, Wilbur, Garrett, & Yuhas, 2001) for all participants and recorded the discussion. In acknowledgement of my use of testimonio as method (Haig-Brown, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2009), this final audio-recorded and transcribed meeting was held at my home near Hillridge over an informal Caribbean meal. Using ethnographic methods (Mayan, 2009; Riemer, 2012), I took field notes during all our meetings and added conversational details to my notes once the conversation was over.

During the initial and final sessions, I asked open-ended questions (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Riemer, 2012) that encouraged participants to discuss their social and academic experiences both at home and in the United States. I also asked participants questions about their perceptions of race and the role it plays in society before and after arrival to the United States. I generated follow-up questions based on their responses.

During our weekly meetings, the participants and I engaged in general conversation in my effort to understand their ways of knowing. Our conversations were informal and discussed their social life, their classes, and their families. Analysis and data generation occurred simultaneously and iteratively during data collection (Mayan, 2009), and after data collection was complete, I performed a cross-case analysis of interviews and field notes followed by coding, categorizing, and allowing themes to emerge from the data.

Bricolage

For this research study, I used bricolage, which acknowledges the complexity of the lived world and the limitations of using an isolated method or approach (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012). Using bricolage, I incorporated indigenous and endarkened methodologies (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012), critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), transcultural theory (Huffman, 2008; Huffman, 2010), and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano and Yosso, 2009) into a composite lens through which I could make sense of the research phenomenon. Through understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, bricolage allows me to gain consciousness of “[my] own and others’ historicity” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 10) while exploring the complexities of the participants’ perceptions, perspectives, and experiences. The use of bricolage encourages me to “ask informed questions, develop complex concepts, construct alternate modes of reasoning, and provide unprecedented interpretations of the data [I] generate” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 13), while considering the way power shapes both my knowledge and its acquisition.

Testimonio

I have chosen to use testimonio as method not only to deepen my connection with my participants, but also to encourage sharing and unearthing of knowledge that is “underrepresented or invisible within conventional academic discourses” (Haig-Brown, 2003, p. 416). The sacred nature of this research, which refers to “the way the work is honored and embraced as it is carried out” (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011, p. 149) is informed by endarkened and indigenous paradigms (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012), which make traditional interviewing styles and data collection methods seem overly formal and stilted. As a form of oral tradition and personal expression, the use of testimonio connects with the storytelling traditions of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), endarkened and indigenous paradigms (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012), and the counterstorytelling inherent in critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009).

In my effort to encourage participants to share their experiences, I did not present myself as an impartial outsider, but rather demonstrated my willingness to reciprocate their vulnerability by sharing some of myself as well. Testimonio creates space for non-hierarchical dialogue (Freire, 1970) and the storying of our experiences within the community.

My Two Manuscripts

I have chosen to present my research in the form of two manuscripts. In manuscript one, *Transcultural Adaptations: Caribbean Students at U.S. Universities*, I explore the daily lived experiences of five Caribbean students studying at a rural university on the East Coast. I investigate the personal challenges encountered by young adult Caribbean students and focus on their perspectives and coping strategies as they negotiate the racial binary and sociocultural norms found in the United States. Framed both by my use of testimonio as method (Haig-Brown, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2009) and the composite lens formed by my use of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012), I look at how all these factors influence their academic experiences and the ways in which they perceive and perform the Self. In doing so, I highlight key aspects of the community experience and add to the conversation surrounding the adaptation of international students at U.S. universities.

In manuscript two, *Interrogating Whiteness: The View from Outside*, I delve more deeply into one aspect of the phenomenon by interrogating one participant's perspectives on whiteness. I use critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) and the call-and-response tradition (Hebdige, 1987; Toussaint, 2009) common in Trinidad & Tobago and the African diaspora to present my exploration of his perspectives. I present his perspectives using the third person voice and follow those with an examination of my own ways of knowing, presented in the first person, in order to highlight the questioning and internal conflict that emerged as a result of these conversations on whiteness. I share my epiphanic experience (Denzin, 2013; 2014) in

the hopes of establishing discourse and resonance with my reader in this
deconstruction of my way of understanding the world.

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Chapter 2

Transcultural Adaptations: Caribbean Students at U.S. Universities

Dyanis Popova

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract

In this qualitative research project, I explore the daily lived experiences of five Caribbean students studying at a rural university in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I investigate the personal challenges encountered by young adult Caribbean students and focus on their perspectives and coping strategies as they negotiate the racial binary and sociocultural norms found in the United States. Framed both by my use of testimonio as method (Haig-Brown, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2009) and the composite lens informed by my use of bricolage (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012), I look at how all these factors influence their academic experiences and the ways in which they perceive and perform the Self. In doing so, I highlight key aspects of the community experience and add to the conversation surrounding the adaptation of international students at U.S. universities.

Keywords: transcultural, Caribbean, international student, bricolage, testimonio

Introduction

As Caribbean students of color go from being members of the cultural and racial majority in their own countries to being members of a minority group, and white Caribbean students—whether or not they identify as such—experience the reverse, they are influenced on a daily basis by the way they are perceived and labeled within the racialized social norms of the United States (Dunbar Jr., 2008; Lorick-Wilmot, 2010). This reframing by the dominant ideology can not only heavily influence students' sociocultural experiences, but their academic experiences as well.

There is a significant disconnect between what international students actually experience and what faculty and administration think they are experiencing (Galloway & Jenkins, 2009). As institutional policies are typically gendered, racialized, and nationalistic, they can limit students' subjectivities, and ignore the power of policy discourse in producing identity (Matus, 2006). I use the term identity cautiously in this paper. I understand that this term is layered and laced with a variety of individual and field-related perspectives and that its definition can sometimes cause controversy. I use it here to speak generally of the ways in which individuals understand, frame, and perform the Self. The power of the identity imposed on Caribbean students by U.S. social norms has rarely been studied, and the ways in which that power intersects with privilege both in and out the classroom, even less so.

Through qualitative research, I examine and learn from the experiences of Caribbean nationals studying in the United States. I investigate the personal challenges encountered by young adult Caribbean students and focus on their perspectives and coping strategies as they negotiate the racial binary and sociocultural norms found in

the United States. I look at how all these factors influence their academic experiences and their perceptions and performances of the Self. In doing so, I highlight key aspects of the community experience and add to the conversation surrounding the adaptation of international students at U.S. universities.

I was drawn to this research through my own experiences as an international student from the Caribbean almost twenty years ago. Although the challenges and sociocultural norms have changed with the times, the core of the experience remains. Through the connections and reciprocity I developed with my participants, I was able to trouble objectivity and the idea of one Truth (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) while focusing on the complexity of making meaning of one's life experiences. I engaged in meaningful, non-hierarchical dialogue (Freire, 1970) with my participants, and in turn developed a better understanding of how they position themselves in relation to their host and home communities. In entering this conversation, I am able to name their challenges and (re)present their experiences (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011; Smith, 2012).

Theory and Methods

Bricolage

Using bricolage, which acknowledges the complexity of the lived world and the limitations of using an isolated method or approach (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2012), I incorporated indigenous and endarkened methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012), transcultural theory (Huffman, 2008; Huffman, 2010), and critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-

Billings, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solórzano and Yosso, 2009) into a composite lens in order to make sense of the research phenomenon. Through the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, bricolage allows me to gain consciousness of “[my] own and others’ historicity” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 10) while exploring the complexities of the participants’ perceptions, perspectives, and experiences, thus allowing readers to form visceral and personal connections to the experiences themselves.

Testimonio

I used *testimonio* as method not only to deepen my connection with my participants, but also to encourage sharing and unearthing of knowledge that is “underrepresented or invisible within conventional academic discourses” (Haig-Brown, 2003, p. 416). In my effort to encourage participants to share their experiences, I demonstrated willingness to reciprocate their vulnerability by sharing some of myself as well, rather than trying to appear impartial. When used in combination with the bricolage in my theoretical framework, testimonio troubles the traditional framing of research and creates space for (re)membering (Dillard, 2012; Smith, 2012), as well as naming, reframing, and representing (Smith, 2012) participants’ lived sociocultural and educational experiences.

Testimonio is intended to inform those outside a community about the community’s challenges and conditions of life, often as “a politically and pedagogically conscious, counter-hegemonic, educational research tool” (Haig-Brown, 2003, p. 422). As a form of oral tradition and personal expression, the use of testimonio connects with the storytelling traditions of endarkened and indigenous paradigms (Bishop, 2005; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011;

Smith, 2012), and the counterstorytelling inherent in CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). This type of approach “has the potential to open space for a form of truth telling while, at the same time, allowing people to keep their secrets” (Haig Brown, 2003, p. 416).

I generated data through weekly hour-long meetings with my participants during the course of a semester. I audio-recorded and transcribed the first and final meetings, with the final meeting held as a talking circle (Jennings, Tan, & Gandarilla, 2015; Wilbur, Wilbur, Garrett, & Yuhas, 2001). Data sources included audio transcriptions and ethnographic field notes. I made meaning of my data through cross-case analysis of interviews and field notes and by coding, categorizing, and creating space for themes to emerge (Mayan, 2009).

Context

The university campus is located in Hillridge, Virginia³, a center for diversity within a rural community with approximately 43,600 residents, just under half of the county’s population. According to the demographics on the university website, there are over 30,000 enrolled students, more than 25,000 of whom are undergraduates. 65% of students identify as white—in contrast with 93% regionally, 4% identify as black, 5% as Hispanic, and 8% as Asian. Foreign nationals make up 11% of the university population. Of that number, less than 1% are Caribbean nationals. There were only 10 Caribbean nationals enrolled during the 2014-2015 school year⁴.

Four participants were Caribbean nationals on F-1 visas and the fifth was born in the United States to Caribbean parents and had lived in the Caribbean from the age of

³ Name of places and participants have been changed.

⁴ This information was provided via email on February 10, 2015 by the Interim Director of the international center.

three. All participants were undergraduates ages 18-25 as this age is crucial in shaping one's perspective on the framing of self and identity (Conrad & Brown, 2007; Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014).

Participants

I met my first participant through an English language program at the university in Hillridge. He cleaned the white boards in the classrooms and helped with other maintenance tasks for the administrators of the program. My other participants knew each other as one was responsible for recruiting three others by word of mouth. I met the first of this group through a recruitment email I sent to the local Caribbean student organization. Although the four participants who knew each other are all studying in the engineering department, they had met through events hosted by the Caribbean student organization.

Julio: Julio, a national of Trinidad & Tobago, is a fourth year student in a very specialized engineering program. At 22 years old, he is the eldest of four siblings and when at home, he lives with them, his parents, and two widowed grandmothers. His father is Catholic and of Portuguese ancestry and his mother is Muslim and of East Indian ancestry. He grew up in an upper middle class community with English as his first language.

Jared: Jared, a second year student from rural Haiti, is studying in the agriculture department looking at soil and sustainability. He is 25 years old and the eldest of five siblings. He was raised in a working class community and when in Hillridge, he resides with the local family who secured funding for him to study in the United States after

meeting him during their trip to the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince. His first language is Haitian Creole but he also speaks fluent French.

Kent: Kent, a 22 year old student in his second year, is studying in the engineering department. He was born in the United States to Barbadian parents and has resided in Barbados since he was three years old. He considers Barbados his home and describes his family as upper middle class. He worked in his field for two years in between starting college in Barbados and enrolling in the United States. His first language is English.

Sita: Sita is a national of Belize, which is considered a mainland Caribbean country though it is geographically part of Central America. She is an 18 year old engineering student in her second year and the younger of two siblings. She was raised in an upper middle class Catholic community and identifies as being of mixed ancestry including Latina, Garifuna, and Mayan. Her first language is English and she is also fluent in Spanish.

Noro: Noro, an 18 year old first year student, is a national of Jamaica. He is pursuing a degree in engineering and identifies as both racially mixed and upper middle class. His immediate and extended families—all practicing Anglicans—are concentrated in one community in western Jamaica. His first language is English.

Navigating the College Campus

As Caribbean students leave the countries they call home, they face the same struggles that any young adult faces when leaving home, often for the first time: homesickness, depression, isolation, confusion over identity and values, discrimination and prejudice, uncertainty and anxiety, somatic complaints, cognitive distress, and

depression (Johnson & Sandhu, 2007). Despite these challenges, attending college is also an opportunity for students to explore and develop their identity (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014), as they must negotiate the ways in which they see themselves and how they frame that image for others. As with Hall (2013), I use the concept of identity here positionally and strategically, rather than with essentialist connotations. Identity is not fixed, but rather accumulated during one's lifetime (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Kaplan & Herb, 1999). This discussion highlights the formation and structure of the broad concept of identity, while acknowledging the transcultural realities in which positionality, as a form of identity performance, is at the forefront of student experience.

Late adolescence/early adulthood is a time when students form their personal and social identities, exploring and experimenting with different social roles (Conrad & Brown, 2007). This identity formation is a "process of personal exploration leading to the formation and linking of one's attitudes, values, and beliefs to social belongingness" (Conrad & Brown, 2007, p. 3). It is essential to combining the academic and sociocultural adaptation processes into a fruitful and positive endeavor. International students in particular, face difficulties that include different food tastes, perceptions of time, gender/sexual roles and concepts, language, finances, and feelings of isolation (Lee & Rice, 2007). Although these researchers found that students eventually developed an intercultural competence in their negotiation of both host and home culture, the main challenge of this adaptation is that students are often expected to bridge this gap on their own with minimal support from the institution at which they are enrolled. Due to the close ties between psychological wellbeing and academic success,

these issues are particularly important for institutes of higher education to consider as they welcome international students to their campuses.

Additionally, the challenge to a student's cultural and ethnic identity generated by the normalized U.S. racial narrative can increase stress levels and self-doubt, and feelings of namelessness and obscurity. This invisibility of Caribbean students, facilitated by linguistic and racial similarities, as well as by general assumptions of cultural sameness due to geographic proximity, leads both institutions of higher education and U.S. society, in general, to underestimate the unique needs of Caribbean students related to their academic and cultural adaptation (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Guy, 2001) and as such, their specific educational needs are largely ignored (Murray-Johnson, 2013).

Three themes representing aspects of the student experience emerged from the data. Participants talked about their cultural experiences related to personal identifiers, the framing of race and racialized experiences at home and in the United States, and the ways in which they navigate academic life as Caribbean nationals. I do not claim that these themes are all inclusive and all-encompassing but rather I assert that these named challenges reflect experiences that transcend nationality and offer fresh perspectives into the experience of international students, particularly those coming from Caribbean nations. With this presentation of the data, I weave my participants' comments and conversations into a narrative that scaffolds their perspectives into one whole, trying to draw readers into the experience.

Culture: The Experience of Being Me

Much of the information shared by my participants acknowledges the influence of culture in their lives, both at home and in the United States. For all five participants, their culture is inextricably connected to their countries of origin and their family histories. Racial ancestry has limited influence on how they perceived themselves but while in the United States, it plays an important part of how they are perceived by others. Their understanding of their culture and the role it plays in their daily interactions has determined not only their circle of friends but also if and how they chose to showcase aspects of their culture while in Hillridge.

Social connections. With just under 11,000 students from Caribbean nations studying in the United States during the 2014/2015 schoolyear (International Institute of Education [IIE], 2015), the dispersal of Caribbean students results in the re-forming of new connections and oftentimes, a loss of the old. Social media has helped tremendously in maintaining connections across borders and time zones, but the challenge of maintaining old connections while building new ones is widespread.

Reflecting the demographics of the university, all participants noted that the level of diversity among their friends back home was significantly greater than in the United States. We discussed diversity as having several friends from a variety of races, religions, genders, abilities, socioeconomic statuses, and with a variety of interests. Julio felt particularly able to navigate the racial/class divide found in Caribbean countries as a remnant of colonialization because although he was raised in an upper middle income home and attended a prestigious school, he “had a just real rugged like bunch of guy friends, as well as that kind of upper echelon friends.” For Julio, rugged is a

synonym for a lower socioeconomic status (SES), which also reflects race and social norms in the region. His upper echelon friends are the product of relationships established by his parents long before his birth. During our first interview, he notes, “It’s partly because of the history aspect [. . .]The white boy’s [. . .] parents were friends with my dad growing up kinda thing.” Noro and Sita both add, during separate conversations, that their friendship base at home is also highly dependent on the children of their parents’ friends but that because of historical ties across ethnic groups, sociocultural stratification is not clearly visible.

My friends back home are from a bunch of different ethnic groups, different social backgrounds, economic backgrounds. Here my friends are like the middle class kind of type that you typically find at U.S. universities. (Sita, initial interview)

As relatively new arrivals to the United States though, those historical connections are not always available. Across all participants, social connections while enrolled in classes have been established primarily through their living accommodations or academic courses. Only Noro, due to his short time in the United States, is still building his friendship base in Hillridge. Jared lives off campus and as he resides with a local family, much of his socializing also occurs through activities with the family, like parades, triathlons, and dinner with friends. Both Sita and Noro live in *living learning communities* with other engineers and find themselves primarily surrounded by classmates.

I feel like a lot of my friends are ones I have classes with cuz most of my friends I’ve made are from people who lived around me who were also engineers because of the living learning community I’m in. I talk to people I meet in other

activities and stuff like that, but I don't really hang out with them that much. (Sita, initial interview)

Jared and Julio are athletic and have both made numerous connections playing pick-up soccer at various locations on campus. Church was also noted as playing a major role in socializing as Sita, Julio, and Jared attend services regularly, though not at the same locations. Across the board, making friends has relied on location: dorms, classes, the student center, and sports fields.

If you share something in common, it is more likely easier to get to know a student [. . .] I make most of my friends either in classrooms sharing some topic, trying to work in a group, as like group homework. Also, when I go to club, I have a friend when I play soccer. Also at [the student center] it's easier for me to get friends. (Jared, initial interview)

Julio and Kent both feel that the lack of interconnected historical context in the United States makes it even harder to make genuine friends here. They feel that sociocultural labeling focusing on individual attributes is based on limited information about the individual and that most of their peers in the United States

just associate with people who can benefit them. It's a very self-invested process framed by 'I want to be viewed a certain way, so I need to view people a certain way too. You're either right or wrong to be associated with. (Julio, talking circle)

Notably, all participants miss the ease of community socializing that they have experienced back home. In discussing the fact that they feel life in the United States is very formalized, Jared and Kent shared how little they know about their neighbors, which is generally uncommon in Caribbean neighborhoods.

In Haiti you'll see neighbors even like three or four times a week. They can stop by and say hello but I don't really see that here. Maybe because people are too busy here, because you don't really see people often, unless you are [at a] party or you have something else. But like on Sundays in Haiti, sometimes people will stop by your house and say hi for a little bit and then after that go home. I expected people do the same here. It seems different here, because here you only see people whenever you invite them or you have something special. But I kind of realized that culture. It's not something they grew with, being able to see people every day. (Jared, talking circle)

Kent shared his belief that people in the United States operate by a different code that is founded on "if you don't have a reason to come, and you're just coming to talk, then don't come." He was also quick to note that this is a generalization and that he had met individuals who didn't fit that mold. During our final talking circle, all participants discussed the feelings of isolation—however fleeting—that they feel due to this lack of community familiarity in their experience in the United States.

Connections with other Caribbean nationals. Interestingly, although four of the five participants knew each other previously due to connections through the Caribbean student organization, none regularly interacted outside of academics. Except for Julio, who is on the Caribbean student organization board, none of the participants regularly attend meetings as the majority of attendees are United States nationals who are interested in learning about Caribbean culture. There is no connectivity or appeal of meeting others from your nation of origin associated with the organization. The participants in my study occasionally interact during the social events thrown by the

Caribbean group, but none regularly communicate with other international students. For them, the university center for international students, which was a major contributor to my friendship circle as an undergraduate, is no more than a place to ensure that they are fulfilling all legal obligations.

I mostly interact with Americans because the major international populations of students are Chinese or Asian in general and I noticed that they kind of stick together in a group and are not really social with people outside, as far as I can tell. (Noro, initial interview)

This sentiment was echoed by all participants.

Facilitated by the fact that he had already lived in the United States for two years prior to enrollment, only Kent has fought to maintain a close circle of Caribbean friends in the United States. During that time, he had relied on word of mouth to build friendships.

You know Caribbean people. There's always a friend of a friend of a friend or a distant cousin. My relatively close friends that live in America or are from America are usually friends in terms of . . . they're either friends with my cousin or friends with someone that I knew who lived in Barbados but grew up with these people here, something like that. Because in my mind, if you're friends with someone I know and trust [. . .] and you've been friends with this person for a long time, I know these people. If you do some stupid stuff, they probably will not be friends with you. (Kent, initial interview)

For all participants, their closest circle of friends is still comprised of school-age friends from "back home." They noted that social media and smart phone applications that offer

free phone and video calling are of extreme importance in maintaining those connections and even establishing new ones through social networking.

Cultural adaptations. Upon arrival in a new culture or community, many students feel some form of cultural dissonance (Arthur, 2003; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). The magnitude of this dissonance and the way in which it is managed varies from person to person and can involve both conscious and unconscious choices (Schrauf, 2002). These challenges include, but are not limited to, the food they eat, the way they speak, and their ways of knowing and understanding the world. Again, largely due to social media and the growth of transculturalism, which is defined as involvement in another culture without loss of ones' own cultural identity, none of my participants have experienced major challenges to their performance of the Self. Nevertheless, the challenges they face, however mild in their individual perspectives, have resulted in notable changes to their behaviors and thought processes.

Some adaptations have resulted from unfounded perceptions about the United States learned within their home cultures. Jared and Noro had a difficult time reconciling their urban notions of the United States with the rural landscape in Hillridge.

I thought the U.S. was like Haiti: [that] there is only one single place where all people are together and then [there is] agricultural land to farm. I thought everywhere was cities, crowded like New York. (Jared, initial interview)

Jared also believed that most people in the United States stayed indoors all the time and notes that he was pleasantly surprised when he discovered that there are numerous opportunities for outdoor activities in and around Hillridge.

Sita in turn believed that she would find a population that all had “an attitude of superiority.” She is used to U.S. tourists at home “who think they are gods when they go to your country.” Upon her arrival, she met many other students who did not fit that pattern of behavior and has since amended her opinion to include the fact that only a percentage of the population has the type of behavior she had dreaded encountering. Julio alone feels that his perceptions have remained the same. Referencing encounters with students in his engineering specialty, he still believes that the U.S. populace is structured around “wanting material things, having prejudices a lot more, and being a lot more close-minded.”

Food. As expected, all participants noted changes in eating habits. Although students can have almost anything shipped to Hillridge nowadays, it is often cost prohibitive, and like many of their U.S. counterparts, they have neither the necessary resources nor the skills for meal preparation. Noro, who notes that he does not have a typical Jamaican palate, still longs for “a patty or brown stew chicken or something that is Jamaican.” Jared too noted that “when [he] first got here, the food was terrible for [him] to adapt to.” On their regular return trips to the Caribbean—at least twice per year for each—food is one of the first things they seek out. Similarly, I have lived in the United States for almost twenty years and I still race to eat as many foods from home as possible when I return home or visit a major U.S. city.

Sita noted that she has adopted her classmates’ habit of having a strong cup of coffee in the midafternoon to make it through the day, a habit she found perplexing and “decidedly American” before her arrival. Although her high school work load was far more intense than what she encountered here, she did not develop the habit until

almost the end of her first year. Now, even when she returns to Belize, she must have that 3 o'clock cup of coffee. Similarly, Kent has switched to drinking bottled water and flavored drinks. At home in Barbados, he always drank tap water and avoided sodas and juices. However, upon his arrival to the United States—before coming to Hillridge—he “had a very, very difficult time drinking the tap water that was here. For the first four or five months, [he] had to rotate between drinking bottled water and tap water together to get used to it.” His dislike of the tap water in New York and Northern Virginia resulted in him never having tried the water in Hillridge. He assumes it will be terrible.

Clothing. Finding the right balance between dressing for cold weather and hot classrooms presents a challenge to all participants, even the ones who had previously visited the United States. During his first year in the United States, Kent “wore at least probably like five, six layers of clothing.”

I never really figured out the whole dress for the occasion in terms of not overheating and whatnot, so that was a big thing I had to deal with. After a while I got used to it. (Kent, talking circle)

I myself remember explaining to my friends here why I was wrapped in a wool blanket when it was 62° F and sunny. All participants mentioned feeling pressure to “brave the cold” when their classmates are wearing short sleeves and shorts. They also each carry a sweatshirt everywhere they go in the event of a temperature change, which is quite common in Hillridge. When questioned by others, “I’m from the Caribbean” is the most common defense.

Discussing one aspect of clothing that is not related to the change in climate, Julio noted that he spent a lot of money and a lot more time during his first three years

here getting ready because he wanted “to be viewed as someone who was of means or someone who suited ideals of the fraternity kind of individuals.” He aspired to that status and knew that by being able to blend in, he might be able to gain their friendship or at least benefit from networking opportunities.

Accent. During each discussion, the concept of accent emerged organically and early. Noro has only been in the United States for a few months, so he has the strongest Caribbean accent. Also eighteen years old, Sita has been here for two years and has no discernible Caribbean accent at all. For many, like Sita, keeping or losing one’s accent happens before they are aware of what is taking place (Popova, 2016). This results in challenges to one’s identity on the return home, and for Sita and Jared, they have managed the change by developing a type of code switching that is helpful, but not without its problems.

I don’t realize I’m doing it, but I still kind of speak a little bit with an American accent when I’m speaking full English. But then [other Belizeans] make fun of me, so after a little bit I get back to speaking like I used to. Even when I’m speaking English I sound more like I’m speaking with a Belizean accent over an American accent. (Sita, talking circle)

Kent notes that because he spent the first three years of his life in the United States, he never fully developed a typical Barbadian accent. However, he still has a very distinct lilt to his voice, although he believes he has lost any trace of it.

Since I’ve been here, I’ve lost my accent and it comes back very slowly when I am home. But because of how quickly we talk there, when I have an accent and I’m in the States, no one will understand a word I say. Having to slow down so

often, I've eventually lost it. Going back home, people make comments about the fact that I'm no longer local [. . .]I know they're just making jokes about it, but I'm like 'that's not what it is.' (Kent, talking circle)

Noro also commented on having to slow down, adding that because he always has to repeat himself, he sometimes gives up on conversations or adding details because it's too much work. All participants determined that their frequent trips home help them maintain some aspects of their accent, which is an important part of their identity as Caribbean students.

Self-conscious voice. Changes in speech go beyond accent to include that which is being said. All participants believe that they have had to be more aware and more cautious about speaking in public as they feel that U.S. nationals are very sensitive and easily offended. This is in stark contrast to Kent's description of Caribbean people as "straight forward, get-to-the-point kind of people." They all employ a form of code switching and note spending more time thinking about what they want to say before responding, when interacting with non-Caribbean persons.

I think my expressions have changed a little bit because sometimes you could say something and I feel like people back home wouldn't take it a way, but people here would get offended. But for instance, I call people black, and I'm like oh you know, he's a black guy that sits in the back row, and the people are like Oh my God you just called someone Black, and I just am like ok. Then also some of my mannerisms. Back home I could roll my eyes where like here, if I roll my eyes people are like oh my God you're so sassy, and I'm like alright you just said something dumb so I rolled my eyes. I don't see anything wrong with that. They'll

take it like more aggressive than it actually is. Like they won't get like the joke out of it [. . .]I feel I'm all the time choosing what to say based on who I'm talking to. I say sorry a lot here too. (Sita, initial interview)

It is important to note that as the sole English Language Learner (ELL), Jared's strong and obviously French-based accent was beneficial. It encouraged other students and even faculty to approach him about his country of origin and inquire about aspects of his culture. People have generally showed interest in the story of his life, whereas the other participants noted more instances in which people seemed wary of their presence. In part because of his accent, Jared was more easily able to benefit from the "you're not really black, you're from the Caribbean" idea that is commonly espoused when perceptions of blackness and the actions of the individual create some degree of cognitive dissonance in the speaker. Jared was keenly aware of this distinction and noted that there had been instances in which the sound of his accent seemed to put people at ease.

Resisting adaptation. Although participants spoke at length about the culturally based adjustments they had to make upon their arrival to the United States, there are clearly some areas that they felt were not open to compromise. The first sub-theme that emerged was related to the way that college students in the United States consume alcohol. In downtown Hillridge, which spans about six blocks, there are about a dozen bars. Although the university boasts a dry campus, the bars—on average about one block from campus—are filled to capacity most evenings. House parties on the bus route are also very popular and it is common for students to ride the bus until they see a crowd or group indicating a party. Few Caribbean countries have or enforce a legal

drinking age. All participants were raised to believe that alcohol is a parental responsibility in their communities and that social drinking is normalized but that “getting wasted” is not. Noro, Kent, and Julio indicate an acute distaste for the binge drinking they often encounter at bars or parties in the area.

The students here are really intense. Like they go with a purpose of getting drunk. I’m not used to that. Back home, you use alcohol as something to drink or to loosen you up a bit or something like that. But here, they go with the intent of getting drunk. It’s creepy. A lot of social interactions here revolve around that behavior. (Noro, initial interview)

All participants seemed confident that they would not begin to emulate this behavior.

Other evidence of resistance emerged when discussing “traditional” Caribbean greetings. It is quite common in many islands to say good morning, good afternoon, or good evening when encountering another person, either at home or out in public. Although that exists in some U.S. communities, participants noted that they often receive questions, comments, or strange looks when offering what they consider a “common courtesy.” Although these greetings may sound formal and stilted to some, they are an important part of the day for a significant majority of Caribbean nationals and ex-patriots. Sita shared that she has developed a great relationship with the housekeeping staff in her dorm because of the fact that she is the only person on her floor who greets them. Referring to his pre-college roommates during our talking circle, Kent shared:

I’d usually be the first one down or the second one down. I’d be like “good morning, what’s up? How’s your day going so far?” At least a couple times out of

the week they would ask me “Why do you say good morning? Why are you saying this?”

All participants shared similar stories of greeting fellow students in class, in the library, or in their dorms. Most experience either silence or quizzical looks in response to their greeting.

During our talking circle, in comparing the situation to what was considered normal in their home cultures, Kent and Sita shared instances during winter breaks at home during which they forgot to greet a relative upon entering the kitchen after waking up. They were both promptly asked to re-enter the room to correct the oversight. Julio added, “In Trinidad people wouldn’t serve you. No matter if you in KFC, if you don’t tell the woman ‘good morning’, she wouldn’t serve you, she’d be like ‘nah! Excuse me?’ and all you can do is say ‘good morning miss.’” The others nodded and concurred with Kent’s statement that it is “not so much focused on being sociable, but more so being respectful of your elders, and kind of also being respectful generally, because that’s the thing to do.” The discussion of this greeting was quite lengthy during our talking circle and its use or lack thereof has a profound influence on how the participants viewed others and framed the performance of respect.

Race: Framing and Being Framed

Race, and within it a multitude of dendritic connections, emerged as the second major theme in this exploration. When international students enter the United States to pursue their studies, they are automatically identified through the perspectives informed by racialized social norms. As “human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance” (Haney López, 2009, p. 239), the particular shade of one’s skin or the width of one’s

nose can determine one's placement in U.S. society. Additionally, race, and its position within the liminal spaces at "the edges of society from which their identities and experiences are constructed" (Rollock, 2012), has a profound impact on one's ways of knowing and one's relationship to knowledge (Dunbar Jr., 2008). Interestingly, students who are visibly mixed were clear to point that out, whereas those who are externally identified as black did not mention their race in discussion without prodding.

Regardless of the ways in which students define their own racial identity, their sojourn is shaped by these norms and, depending on their support systems or intercultural competence, these norms may additionally influence the ways in which they negotiate and understand their educational and sociocultural experiences. All participants indicated that their expectations for encountering racism while studying in the United States were high.

Participant self-identification. As there is significance in being able to name one's reality (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011), I asked all participants in this study about how they self-identify and how they rank various aspects of that identity including race/ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and country of origin. I encouraged participants to include additional categories as needed. They were specifically asked about their self-identification both before and since their arrival in the United States. None report changes in their identification but all feel that their understanding of that identification is more nuanced since their arrival. Four of the five participants primarily identify with their country of origin, but for Sita, her ethnicity takes precedence due to her belief that her ethnicity reflects a major part of her culture.

Table 2 <i>Participant self-identification</i>			
Participants	Primary Identification	Secondary Identification	Tertiary Identification
Julio	Trinidadian	Male	Mixed race
Jared	Haitian	Caribbean	Black
Kent	Barbadian	Male	Christian
Sita	Mestizo	Belizean	Catholic
Noro	Jamaican	Athletic	Christian

For all five participants, race had not become a consideration in that identification until after they moved to the United States to study. For Noro, the only first year student, race still has not come to the forefront of his consideration. He is far more concerned with balancing his academic requirements and social life than anything else. All participants, to varying degrees, agree that they have had limited or no experience with issues of race back home.

Perceptions of race at home. Sita, Noro, and Jared felt that race wasn't an issue in their countries, although they all noted the role that class plays in that perception. Everyone but Jared identifies as upper middle class in their home environment. They all stress that class and wealth play a larger role than race in determining opportunities and inequities. Jared also notes that through the colonial legacy, color largely determines the composition of neighborhoods in Haiti but that discrimination is more often based on linguistics. In his opinion, those who speak French are treated with significantly more respect than those who speak only Creole, regardless of race or class, although class plays a major factor in one's exposure to formal French language learning.

Julio also emphasized the role of other social frameworks in Trinidad during our initial interview:

Back home, it's more about who your friends group was growing up and your activities: who you went by for lessons, what sports you played, that kind of thing. That dictates your racial relationships and even probably your physical relationships with women [. . .] Trinidad is a very mixed group and everybody has the same experiences. It's not like only white people get to do these kinds of things over here. Everybody [regardless of race] goin' to the Harts band launch⁵, everybody goin' and playin' mas⁶, everybody goin' beach on Ash Wednesday. Wealth is much more important than race nowadays.

Being part of what is considered popular or culturally relevant is far more important than race in his experience.

Defining the mold. All participants note pressure to define themselves based on standards relevant in the United States, even when they are unsure of what those standards are or the depth of their influence.

People come up to me and by looking at me, without even talking, they're like, 'What race are you?' because I'm not black, I'm not really white. So I'm kind of smack dab in the middle. I'm not used to such rigid stuff. [Noro]

Since I moved here, most people identify me as black, like my friends who are Causcasian identify me as black but then I have some friends who are black and they always tell me that 'you're not black.' (Sita, initial interview)

Along with Sita and Noro, Julio also discussed the contrast of this against the fluidity of race at home. All three feel that racial identification in their home countries is more

⁵ Harts is a popular group that produces costumes for Carnival paraders. They hold a massive party annually to display the designs for the following year.

⁶ Playing mas refers to participating in the annual Carnival parade. Trinidad hosts the second largest Carnival celebration worldwide.

flexible and situational—often based on the time, place, and who you are with. At home, multi group identification is the norm among their peers. The inflexibility of the U.S racial binary was discussed at length, with Noro and Julio pointing out that they feel that having to choose one aspect of their racial heritage with which to identify means disregarding and disrespecting other ancestors. Julio specifically feels some unease being viewed as an East Indian male walking around campus since it contrasts strongly with his mixed race identity and connects him to the negative connotations people in the United States often associate with persons from the Middle East and South Asia.

In Trinidad, it's more so that everybody has had shared experiences and the same background historically, whereas here it feels like everybody is very polar.

They very strongly identify with 'I'm an Indian person, I'm a white person, I'm a black person' in the U.S. and a lot of their context is based on that definition of themselves. But in Trinidad, it's more so 'We are Trinidadian people' as opposed to 'I'm an Indian Trinidadian.' (Julio, initial interview)

The influence of race in the United States. For all participants, their experience of race and racism in the United States has varied. They all feel a disruption in terms of moving from being a member of the y to being a member of a minority group. However, although they definitely encountered instances of microaggressive behavior (Ee, 2013; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015), no one shared major dissonance based on these experiences. Sita shared that experiencing the racial classification in the United States has made her more aware of racial differences. All other participants echoed this sentiment during the final talking circle.

Coming here and seeing where they draw lines and how they set up their class system and stuff like that, I guess now when I go back home I can see more clearly where lines would be drawn if we were in the U.S.. But back home, those lines aren't there. (Sita, talking circle)

Kent felt that those lines define him in ways that make him uncomfortable. He feels that because he "looks the part" and was born here, he is supposed to identify as African-American. However, he feels no connection to that identity.

Jared has had a few experiences on the bus where people have chosen to stand rather than sit next to him. During these instances, he recalls wondering if it is because of his skin color, but overall he feels that people have not treated him that much differently. Julio alone shared instances of discrimination based on skin color. He feels that he has been treated differently, particularly when trying to gain access to fraternity parties, because people identify him as Indian and question whether or not he belongs in their group. He has noticed that females at the parties often gave him "strange looks" and are far more reluctant to interact with him. In approaching "traditional white girls" to dance, he has more than once heard questions like "What's this Indian fella doing?" which resulted in making him feel "less attractive." This is in stark contrast to his popularity back home where he was "just another kid from a diverse background." He recalls spending "an absurd amount of money" to enhance his "preppy" style of dress so that his inclusion in their class group was clear. He has begun taking advantage of his "exotic" status as an ice-breaker to gain better access to these groups, which he values for networking purposes.

Challenging stereotypes: race and nationality. Although Julio was able to harness the “exotic” stereotype ascribed to him to his benefit, not all participants were as lucky. Noro in particular, in the few short months he has been in the United States, has been frequently questioned about his ability to bring marijuana into the country from Jamaica.

People think that all Jamaicans do is sit down and smoke weed and stuff like that and I have to tell them “No, we don’t all do that stuff.” We have jobs, we work, we do stuff like you guys. We just don’t sit around and smoke weed in a tree hut all day. (Noro, talking circle)

The tree hut stereotype is quite common and all participants have had similar experiences with its use. Kent remembers being asked “Do you guys wear shoes?” and “Do you guys live in huts?” on more than one occasion. Even Kent’s real name has caused conflict as white peers have often commented that it is a white, rather than a black, name. He feels though that even though he has brushed that comment off in the past, he would respond very differently if he were African American, based on the responses he got from a member of that group when sharing his story. He feels as if his Barbadian identity allows him to ignore them because, “This is their country. They are entitled to their opinions.” I find the use of they and their particularly interesting in this context because although Kent sees himself as Barbadian, he is a legal U.S. citizen by birth.

Julio was able to benefit in some ways from this type of stereotyping. He shared that because of the media, most people he encountered in the United States saw the Caribbean as a place of ideals, filled with sun, beaches, and fun. In his experience,

people were usually eager to chat once they found out where he was from because they instantly perceived him as being very “chill and laid back.” After his first year, he began to use that as a conversation starter when meeting new people and feels that this opportunity has offered many benefits. He also briefly mentioned the “unsettlingness” caused by the flip side of this stereotype. He feels that people also often would take him less seriously because they saw him as so laid back and thus, showed their ignorance of “the capabilities of Caribbean people and their influence on the world—like how many significant members of U.S. society originated from the Caribbean.” He was able to list several popular or influential members of U.S. society—Stokely Carmichael, C.L.R. James, Nicky Minaj, Lorraine Toussaint, and Alfonso Ribeiro—who were all born in Trinidad or born in the United States to Trinidadian parents.

Academic Connections

As all participants came to the United States to pursue higher education, their academic success was of utmost importance and was threaded through all our conversations. All participants shared that studying abroad was central to achieving their long-term career goals. Since they met most of their friends in Hillridge through academic pursuits or connections, the contextual and woven relationship between their academic studies and their social world (Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Wortham, 2006) are clear. The disadvantages of navigating university life as an international student were central to our discussions.

Interactions with faculty and staff. As with most undergraduate students, engagement with faculty and staff is limited outside of the classroom and the registrar’s office. Only Sita has had additional experience with faculty. She had been placed in an

advanced calculus class because of her high SAT score but because she had never taken pre-calculus, she struggled early on and sought help from her professor. She found him happy to accommodate her and help her catch up. Overall, participants feel that their interactions with faculty and staff have been generally positive. The few negative interactions shared during data collection were specific to times during which they had to challenge staff members who were implementing policies that the students saw as barriers to their success.

During our talking circle, Julio and Sita highlighted the focus on penalties for international students. Both their departments and the international student center focus on teaching students how to avoid falling out of legal status and to be aware of culturally specific considerations, like plagiarism, which can get them in trouble. Julio noted that faculty and staff do not understand the variety of factors involved in the academic performance of an international student. On several occasions, he has tried to explain the different levels of stress involved and the ways in which students deal with both that and the pressure of such major distance from your family. He feels that, “They have been very unaccommodating,” and that their perspective is centered on the fact that “those students [need to] suck it up and adapt.”

Barriers to success. Participants openly discussed feelings of frustration regarding their international student status, as it related to educational opportunities. The intensity of these sentiments varied but overall, participants feel that the system is “rigged” to benefit U.S. nationals. As such, there are specific challenges that they feel are disregarded by faculty and staff.

Earning potential. Four participants shared that one major reason for choosing to study in the United States was to improve their financial prospects. Degrees attained overseas are highly regarded in the Caribbean and have the potential to impress an employer back home. These students saw their first job, especially if they are able to attain one in the United States, as a crucial factor in determining career success. F-1 visa holders are eligible for a one-year work release—Optional Practical Training [OPT]—at the completion of their studies. For many students, this can turn into permanent employment, or at least increase base pay when they return home. The opportunity allows them to be part of research teams since U.S. and European-based companies do the majority of research and innovation at their home base and in general, engineers hired in the Caribbean are limited to management or field work roles.

As Julio noted, the “trick” is that your practical training year starts upon graduation. Students have to choose between applying during their final semester and potentially not finding employment until significant post-graduation time has passed or waiting to find employment before applying, which then puts them at risk of not having enough time for the application to be processed—approximately three months. Added to the fact that many U.S. employers do not want to deal with the Department of Homeland Security paperwork when there are a bevy of fresh graduates with U.S. citizenship, Julio finds this process to be “demoralizing and stressful.”

I’m not American so I can’t be mad at the system but they get completely different rewards. Masters’ student interns who start at BP make about US\$10,000 a month—which in Trinidad is about TT\$60,000 a month, average

salary⁷. Being able to be recognized in that way for all your hard work and talent is something that motivates you but I don't feel like I got that. It's a state school and even the lower scholarships and internships are funded by state sponsors. They want nothing to do with foreigners. (Julio, initial interview)

As the only participant preparing to graduate, this problem currently affects Julio more than the others. His only solution is to focus on niche markets with smaller employers that might be more flexible, but to him, that feels like lowering his standards.

I just feel like I deserve the best companies and everyone should be banging down my door. It's not an equal playing field [. . .]I'm staying up so late to get these grades and it doesn't even really matter. You just get the F-1 visa thrown in your face. (Julio, initial interview)

The other engineers in the group acknowledged the problem and said that in the future, companies will assume that he didn't get the BP offer because he wasn't qualified, whereas in truth it was because they don't hire foreign students⁸. For Kent, he has faced similar situations due to his accent and has had to explain that he actually has U.S. citizenship. He remarked on the instant positive change that occurs when people find out that he "is not really foreign."

Internships. All four participants pursuing an engineering degree feel that they have to work twice as hard as their U.S. counterparts to be equally as prepared. Julio and Kent are envious that the majority of their U.S. born colleagues have been exposed

⁷ Julio noted that the starting monthly salary in Trinidad for an entry level position would be approximately TT\$10,000 (US\$1667).

⁸ Julio indicated that the career fair representative had shared that with him. The online application process during the career fair had a weed-out process. If a candidate selected that (s)he did not currently have U.S. work authorization, (s)he would almost immediately receive an email stating that (s)he did not make it to the next stage of the process.

to JAVA programming, robotics, and other similar camps or accelerated programs in their public high schools, whereas in the Caribbean, neither of them had had those opportunities. Noro and Sita echoed this sentiment. They have had to start at the very beginning in order to accomplish their goals and feel that they constantly have to prove themselves. Sita noted that her frustrations were sometimes exacerbated by being female in a male dominated field, but she finds her living learning community, which was designed to provide support for female engineers, very helpful.

This challenge is also reflected in the process of finding and securing an internship while enrolled in school, which is required by the engineering department. Both Kent and Julio shared irritation and resentment when dealing with the fact that these internships are required by the university but that the appropriate steps to ensure that international students have equitable access to those opportunities have not been taken. In his final year, despite being near the top of his class, Julio has still not been able to secure an internship. He is currently working with the department to find an alternate solution but has not had much success.

Transfer credits. Many Caribbean students come to the United States with a high sense of self-confidence partially stemming from the belief that Caribbean systems of education are stronger than the ones found here (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014). The high school system is much more intense than what is generally found in the United States and the competition for scholarships and other funding is very aggressive. The final year of high school in former British colonies is considered to be equivalent to the first year in college. It “really annoyed” Noro when the university would not accept any of his work toward college credit. He had already completed some of the most complicated

math offered in his program when he was in high school and is bored in his classes because they are covering topics that he has already studied in detail.

All three participants from former British colonies—Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, and Jamaica—noted that their previous work, although it far surpassed that of their U.S. peers, is not valued or respected. Kent had made the decision to start community college back home with the intent of transferring credits to this specific university. He transferred with only a year left to complete his degree in Barbados but only 20 of his 122 credits were accepted. Half of those he had to fight for by demonstrating how much more work had been covered in his classes in Barbados than what is being taught in the university class. He was even required to prove his proficiency in English even though it is the primary language in Barbados.

In contrast, Jared shared few of these perceptions. His experience has been quite different and the support from his department and his U.S. homestay family help alleviate any frustration he might feel. He was lucky enough to be offered a scholarship by good samaritans and has been able to pursue research through the connections made after his arrival. He feels that because English is not his first language and because he is from a country that evokes sympathy in the minds of many people in the United States, he is often offered accommodations that are not available to others. With this unique set of circumstances and his has had many more positive interactions with faculty and staff and has faced less academic pressure.

Limitations

Although this analysis and presentation is not intended to be generalizable (Mayan, 2009), it is important to note that there are some factors that should be

considered as they potentially affected both data collection and interpretation. I conducted this study on a rural campus with very small numbers of Caribbean students. Students at universities with larger Caribbean populations might have a larger support base and greater access to aspects of their home cultures. In that instance, such a base could insulate new students from the stresses associated with the transition to higher education.

Additionally, as Sita pointed out, discrimination and other negatives are limited not only by “small town culture” but also by the fact that an educated university community is more accepting of difference and diversity. Finally, as none of the research participants in my study could be visually identified as white, I must acknowledge that Caribbean students with visible whiteness might have different experiences with sociocultural adaptation and might share stories with different perspectives than the ones found here.

Discussion

Although the participant pool in this study is regionally diverse, there are several connecting threads through which they share similar experiences. All participants reported feeling homesick during their first semester in Hillridge, which resulted in major attempts to retain home connections. They all see returning home regularly as rejuvenating and a way to retain those connections. Their experiences in the United States to this point have imbued them with an increased appreciation for family life and personal interactions back home. Rather than ossifying their perceptions and perspectives, these experiences have increased their understanding of difference and the fluidity of their positionality.

I have to admit that much of what I found during this study is not what I expected to find. The generation that has passed between my time at a U.S. university and the arrival of these students has allowed for many changes; the overall landscape has changed. Diversity is now part of the conversation, so culturally specific things, like foods and music, are less likely to be ridiculed. Additionally, because of social media and the ease of travel, students can build a support system to combat physical isolation on campus. Most notably, I discovered a conscious resistance to any form of adaptation that changed their core identification. Students are able to make minor adjustments without giving up their ways of knowing and understanding both themselves and the world around them (Huffman, 2010). Because of these extended support systems and the low cost of keeping in touch with family and friends in their home country regularly, they felt no major need to acculturate.

Participants used or at least appreciated language and accent as a way to maintain the performance of their Caribbean identity while simultaneously emphasizing the Other. In general, they wanted to create distance between themselves and either African Americans or people from the Middle East as they are wary of the negative connotations associated with each group. Interestingly, the language and conceptualization of us vs. them was woven throughout all my interviews. They all wanted to fit in and make friends while at the same time limiting cultural compromises.

These students' stories reflect the experiences of many and the complex layering that contributes to transcultural positioning. The fluidity of Caribbean ethnicity makes identity a matter of preference for these students (Nagel, 1998) and creates space for them to adjust their identification and performance of the Self as they deem necessary.

Positioning themselves strongly as Caribbean nationals, regardless of ethnic identification, seemed to limit their experiences with discrimination within their social circles and reposition the power dynamic that relates to their position as the Other.

My experience as a Caribbean national leads me to question the post-race contemporary (Tate & Law, 2015) assertion that discrimination based on race is almost non-existent in the Caribbean region. The colonial legacy is strong and although class is considered a greater factor in many countries, I wonder about the extent to which their socioeconomic status is responsible for shaping their views on race and discrimination. This aspect of their experiences and the role that racial/ethnic fluidity—particularly mixed race identity—plays in framing their perceptions and performances warrants further exploration.

Academically, more must be done to acknowledge and improve the experiences of Caribbean sojourners entering U.S. society through, as Huffman (2010) suggests, culturally affirming counseling, the celebration of heritage, and supportive instructors. Left untroubled, related stressors can enhance the competitive disadvantage these students face due to the limited availability of financial benefits, the pressures of succeeding academically in a new society, differences in social and cultural capital, and the social and networking opportunities missed in order to remain “in status.”

As current institutional rhetoric emphasizes the globalization of the curriculum (Alfred, 2002), the sociocultural context of learning cannot be ignored. Identifying problems is not sufficient. Institutions should additionally focus on how these factors affect student engagement and how to use this knowledge to encourage culturally affirming teaching and counselling (Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000). Attention

to these concerns beyond the often meaningless rhetoric of diversity employed within the university setting can make the experiences of Caribbean students more equitable and can assist with navigating their positionality in a new society. Though these efforts do not remove students from the liminal spaces they inhabit, it is a step toward developing or enhancing their self-confidence and the actualization of their goals in both the sociocultural and academic realms.

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Chapter 3

Interrogating Whiteness: The View from Outside

Dyanis Popova

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Abstract

In this qualitative research project, I delve into one aspect of the transcultural experience of being a Caribbean national studying at a U.S. university by interrogating one participant's perspectives on whiteness. I borrow elements of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) and of the call-and-response tradition (Hebdige, 1987; Toussaint, 2009) common in Trinidad & Tobago and the African diaspora to present my exploration of his perspectives. I present his perspectives using the third person voice and follow those with an examination of my own ways of knowing in order to highlight the questioning and internal conflict that emerged as a result of these conversations on whiteness. I share my epiphanic experience (Denzin, 2013; 2014) in the hopes of establishing discourse and resonance with my reader in this deconstruction of my ways of knowing.

Keywords: whiteness, race, Caribbean, international student, autoethnography

I sat fidgeting in the too large room, staring at the indistinct, beige walls void of all decoration and the angular arrangement of tables and chairs. I counted and recounted my fingers before taking inventory of the items on the table in front of me. Tape recorder with fresh batteries: check. Notebook and writing utensils: check. Interview questions: check. With every moment that passed, my fiddling became more pronounced. Soon, I began to rearrange my materials. Maybe the pencil should be to the left of the pen? I glanced quickly from my cell phone to the oversized white clock on the wall.

5 minutes late . . .

15 minutes late . . .

Despondence slowly rolled over me, weighing me down like a heavy wool blanket. My fear of failure surged forward and my hands began to shake. This was the last person who had responded to my recruitment email. If he didn't show up, moving forward would be quite a difficult task as I was still three persons short of the number of participants I desired for my doctoral research project.

After about twenty minutes had passed, I worked up the courage to send him a text: "Hi! I just wanted to see if you wanted to reschedule our interview." The silence moved like molasses, taking an interminably long time before I heard the reply ping. I was instantly 100 pounds lighter; he had simply overslept and was on his way.

Ten minutes later, a young man in athletic shorts and a worn t-shirt emblazoned with the university logo almost sprinted into the room. He was out of breath and as he wiped the sweat away from his eyes, he plastered the now wet hair framing his face to the skin of his forehead.

"Sorry, sorry, eh!"

“No worrries man. T’all good.” My warm smile and relaxed demeanor did not betray the complex emotions that I had been navigating before his arrival.

I offered him some water and time to catch his breath. He sat with his head tilted backwards, chest heaving, arms akimbo, and with his right ankle resting on his left knee. With each deep breath he took, I regained my composure. When his head snapped up, I lifted my chin, broadened my smile, and decided to get to work on this research business. He had actually shown up.

Our Stories

Emerging from research on the sociocultural and academic experiences of Caribbean nationals at U.S. universities, this piece connects the perspectives of one of my participants with my own experiences as an international student at a rural university in the Blue Ridge Mountains almost twenty years ago. Although almost a generation apart, we are both from the twin island nation of Trinidad and Tobago and shared numerous similar experiences during our time as undergraduates.

Through indigenous and endarkened methodologies (Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011; Grande, 2008; Sefa Dei, 2011; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012) and the use of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orb, 2014; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) I present here one thread of the semester-long weekly conversations during which one participant, Julio, spoke often about his perceptions of whiteness and its role in his daily life. Informed by these methodologies, the use of testimonio as method (Haig-Brown, 2003; Pérez Huber, 2009) during data collection allowed me deepen my connection with Julio through reciprocal vulnerability (Freire, 1970; Tilley-Lubbs, 2016) in order to

facilitate the sharing of knowledge and our ways of knowing and understanding the world.

Through meaningful, non-hierarchical dialogue (Freire, 1970) and the rejection of objectivity (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013; Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), I trouble the traditional framing of research and create space for (re)membering (Dillard, 2012; Smith, 2012), as well as naming, reframing, and representing (Smith, 2012) my and my participants' lived experiences. As colonized beings who still struggle with the bonds of their colonization, there is significance in being able to name our realities (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011). This framework is a way of knowing, a search for completeness, and resistance to the colonial (Sefa Dei, 2011).

I cannot be true to this work without storying and revisioning the "I" (Ellis, 2009), and without acknowledging the guiding presence of my own experiences. As I "write as an Other and for an Other" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 15), I use evocative narratives (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to draw the reader into the conversation. In the space created by this exploration, reflection is key and is at the heart of the narrative (Bochner, 2012). I am not only able to explore my personal experiences but also lend voice to the experiences of others who have shared a similar journey, even when that journey has led to different paths and evoked different emotions. I do not seek a single Truth but rather, I seek to understand how experiences live within my participant and within myself (Dillard, 2012). The use of critical autoethnography creates space in and through which I can integrate the complexities of these perceptions, perspectives, and experiences, and "push against the grain of norms established by the dominant society,

problematizing my own actions and practices from a sociocultural perspective” (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016, p. 6).

The Call-and-Response

When I began writing this piece, I struggled with its presentation until I stopped trying to fit my story into a traditional framework that both sought validity for my doctoral research and moved away from my indigenous and endarkened epistemologies.

Focusing on the idea of memory work (Bochner & Ellis, 2016), I returned to the idea of blending academic and oral tradition (Schneider, 2008) through the use of storytelling and call-and-response, as a way to interpret and share our linked perspectives.

As nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, the rhythm and community voice of Calypso⁹ speaks broadly to us both. Aspects of the structural base of this musical genre—the call-and-response—can be found throughout the music of the African diaspora—Jazz, Blues, Reggae, etc. (Hebdige, 1987). The traditional call-and-response, originating with the chantwell/griot performances that preceded modern Calypso, was intended as political and social commentary and represented the defiance and voice of a people (Samuel, 2004; Toussaint, 2009). Unique to Calypso, this style of intimate and active engagement encourages the audience to punctuate each verse with a chorus that repeats words, phrases, or concepts that highlight the purpose of the story (Conrad, Brown, Philip, Bentley, & Popova, in press). “[It] involves the whole community—everyone can join in” (Hebdige, 1987, p.21) and allows me to take an active stance in creating change for and within the community.

⁹ A style of Caribbean music that originated in Trinidad and Tobago in the 18th Century from the West African chantwell/griot tradition (Samuel, 2004). The era of modern Calypso began at the turn of the 20th century (National Library and Information Systems Authority [NALIS], 2016).

In what follows, I reflect on the perspectives Julio shared with me and on my own experiences. I “want to evoke feeling and induce readers to make a personal connection to the stories. . .” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 80). By using the third person voice in sharing Julio’s experience, I do not in fact position myself as an objective observer, but rather I seek to present the questioning and internal conflict that emerged as a result of these conversations on whiteness. Understanding that “the act of telling is a performance [and] a process of interpretation and communication” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 93) between myself as storyteller and my readers, I explore the jagged worldviews that arose from a history of colonization (Little Bear, 2000), and share my epiphanic experience (Denzin, 2013; 2014) in the hopes of establishing discourse and resonance with my reader in this deconstruction of my ways of knowing.

Framing Whiteness

Julio

I had met Julio once before and I was both intrigued to meet another student from my country—Trinidad and Tobago—and curious to know more about this young man with the Spanish name pronounced in English. He was slender and athletic, and by appearance alone looked distinctly East Indian, though on the lighter-skinned end of the spectrum. His hair was cropped short, with just the popular amount of hair flipped partly forward to his forehead, and his dark chocolate eyes glistened with humorous intent. By any standards, he is an attractive young man. He seemed confident, determined, and full of energy.

The concept of whiteness and its relationship to his daily life emerged organically during our conversation. As Julio contrasted some of his experiences in the United

States with those back home, he shared some internal conflict around how others perceive his race. Like many, I looked at Julio and saw someone of East Indian descent. However, being Trinidadian myself, I am aware of our legacy of colonialism and the variation of ethnic identities and ascriptions that are available to us along the Creole continuum (Denton & Massey, 1989; Hintzen, 2002). My mind automatically tagged a disclaimer onto my perception of Julio's ethnicity, which was validated as I learned more about his story.

Julio's father is a white Trinidadian of Portuguese Catholic ancestry and his mother is of East Indian Muslim ancestry. He is one of four siblings and when at home, lives with his parents and his two widowed grandmothers. There is no evidence of racial or religious conflict in his home. Other than the fact that his skin is a bit lighter than average, there is no clear representation of his Portuguese ancestry. This has created some conflict in his past and continues to present challenges as he completes his bachelor's degree. He notes, "Throughout my whole life, I've always had issues with my whole racial background because I'm mixed." Fortunately, he has never felt that he had to choose a side at home because in Trinidad he was just "another kid who was from a diverse background." Like a significant portion of the population, he falls into a "grey area."

The issues Julio notes with being mixed stem primarily from how he is viewed by others. Influenced by colonial history, East Indians in Trinidad often perceive themselves as Caucasian or close enough to position themselves as such (Khan, 2004). Straight hair and straight noses were—and often still are—the main characteristics in that determination. Julio mentioned the regularity with which he is

referred to as “white boy” back home because of his style of dress and demeanor, and acknowledges that the reference relates more to class than to race. When sharing this, there is a definite change in his tone and body language; he takes pride in the ascription of this phenotype and consciously strives for it as he chooses what to wear and how to present himself.

He knows he “look[s] East Indian [and that] this is how [he] should identify, per se, physically” but he doesn’t feel comfortable in that skin. For him it is about prestige, which has historically been associated with whiteness (Levine-Rasky, 2013). Based on socioeconomic status, the high school he attended, and his circle of friends, he has been able to extend the perception of him as a “white boy,” which holds meaning and provides a sense of comfort. Julio sees whiteness as representative of “stature and wealth and opportunity and stuff like that.” That perception is fluid and not absolute. When he is with others of East Indian ancestry, he accepts being Indian. When he is with white friends, he feels more Indian, but emphasizes his mixed heritage more. When playing sports with black friends, he is white. This protean identity—sometimes Indian, sometimes white, sometimes biracial (Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001), also referred to as a situational identity (Renn, 2008), allows Julio to racially position himself as he sees fit depending on the situation and the people with whom he wants to be affiliated.

Coming to the United States has done nothing to alleviate the challenges he associates with reconciling both halves of his ethnic identity. In the United States, he no longer “gets to play that card.” Here, “it’s like, no, you’re Indian. One hundred percent Indian dude.” His U.S. born peers are often confused when he says he is from the Caribbean because they are generally unaware of the history of Middle Eastern and

Asian indentureship in the region, but in his experience, it makes sense to those from India or Pakistan who can identify slight variations in physical traits. This re-framing has undermined his confidence, especially with members of the opposite sex. He has been cast as the Other and now finds himself in unfamiliar territory. He feels “distinctly less attractive in the U.S.”, particularly in a community that is over 90% white. He has counteracted this by seeking out associations with “frat boy types” and by dressing and comporting himself in a manner that clearly highlights his social class. Since he can’t be “white by association” in the United States because of his skin color, he makes connections with prestige by re-framing himself as the “rich boy” or the “exotic,” thus gaining entry into his desired circle.

Dyanis

As I look in the mirror of my narrow hall bathroom and run my fingers over the slightly chapped skin of my full lips, I contemplate the way that society has defined race in recent centuries. My rounded nose shouts my African heritage, though its relative narrowness was the prompt for many “compliments” from my high school peers who felt its shape highlighted my mixed heritage. My hands drift to the broad and prominent forehead that has never been obscured by bangs. This forehead too has prompted comments, both negative and positive. It was not until I moved to the United States that I was able to connect this forehead to an Ethiopian great-grandmother. To this day, whenever I encounter Ethiopians, they inquire about my heritage, often assuming that I am Habesha¹⁰. Framing that forehead is a mass of kinks and curls to which I am now becoming accustomed. After twenty-seven years of straightening my hair to meet

¹⁰ The Habesha people are a population group, also often referred to as Abyssinians, which includes various ethnic groups along the Horn of Africa.

Eurocentric ideals of beauty, it has now reclaimed its natural state, splitting into three separate textures that look like they belong on three separate heads.

I have always modeled that Eurocentric ideal; it is a by-product of my colonial history. I remember how I felt when my mother first used that old iron hot comb to straighten my hair when I was eleven. For the first time, I could feel the silky trail of hair on the nape of my neck. I remember sitting at the oversized dining table with my head tilted back to make the edge of my hair reach midway down my back. I slowly swished my hair from side to side, feeling proud of the length, the straightness, and the luxury of it all.

Although we do not share the black/white racial binary found in the United States, whiteness in Trinidad and Tobago, and in the greater Caribbean, is framed by the Creole continuum (Denton & Massey, 1989; Hintzen, 2002). Having slightly lighter skin, a slightly straighter nose, and silkier hair was a sign of “good blood.” That trend has been eroded as more and more millennials embrace the “natural” look, but we are a long way away from removing the Eurocentrism from the pedestal against which we measure all else.

I recall too, not long after that, the day that my hair was straightened permanently. I use the passive voice in that statement because I was just that—passive. I did not want a permanent change but my aunt wanted my cousins and me to wear our hair in a particular style for her wedding, and that required straight hair. I either had to be part of it or I would be left out. The decision was made for me and I kept my hair that way for over twenty years. The fear of cutting it all off to start over with a “boy cut” was immobilizing, so it stayed; I have always felt that I look cuter with long hair.

Like Julio, I too took pride in a mixed identity that was not visible to outsiders. My mother's family praised that aspect of my father's heritage as it moved me forward on that Creole continuum and to this day I still hear comments about my "good hair." But, good hair is relative, and on my father's side of the family, my hair did not qualify as such. I don't recall ever feeling envious of that fact, but I do remember my sense of awe and wonder as a child when playing with my grandmother's hair—a token of her Spanish, Native American, and East Indian heritage. My cousin, Ariel, and I would spend hours running our hands through her bone-straight, knee-length, black hair, fascinated by the texture and sheen.

Moving to the United States at the age of eighteen challenged my already shaky self-concept. Here, I was just black. My identity was swallowed by the history and experiences of those born in my host country and the color of my skin became my sole identifier. Gone were the histories of my non-black ancestors, gone were my background and childhood. My identity, the way I saw myself, was not visible to those around me. My arrival had negated all other aspects of my identity and previous successes and all that was left was race (Alfred, 2002). I don't think it was a conscious decision at the time, but like Julio I played on people's conceptualization of Caribbean exoticness. I emphasized my Caribbean identity while at the same time battling the inner conflict of trying to fit in to a new community and new way of understanding the world.

Now, as I stand in the mirror, running my hands over the features that I neither love nor hate, I am at least able to take pride in the convergence of histories that have shaped me to look the way I am. I will never be lighter, my hair and nose will never be

straighter. But, I have my daddy's nose, my great-grandmother's forehead, and hair that represents the struggle, pain, joy, and life of ancestors who crossed vast oceans toward the unknown. I made the choice to stop straightening my hair in protection of my unborn son and I have struggled since his birth with what that means. Tangled within this pride of my histories, I still miss my straight, long hair (Boylorn, 2013). I miss the ease of it and the feel of it. What do people think when they see this unruly mass on top my head? At this stage in my life, I have embraced it all, for better or for worse, but when I walk by this mirror, it still causes me pause because for just one moment, I don't recognize the person looking back at me.

*What is my skin
But a wrapper I'm in.
Shrouded and labeled,
Contents pre-determined.
This skin is all that they see.*

Pursuing Relationships

Julio

Our conversation turned toward a reflection on how these perspectives have shaped our performance of the Self because as Julio himself pointed out, being comfortable with diversity doesn't mean you are willing to enter into a romantic relationship with persons from diverse cultural groups. We spoke about the diversity of his partners from previous romantic relationships and his feeling that he had really dated "all kinds. As long as they're pretty." He has not been in a serious relationship while in college and he has not had any intimate involvement since the beginning of his

third year. He attributes this fact both to being occupied with academic pursuits and the difficult time he has had interacting with members of the opposite sex in the social circle he is trying to build. Julio recalls more than one occasion during which he attended a party where he was the only, or almost the only, minority. In his experience, girls at these parties tend to be more amused with the idea of a foreign exotic than they are interested in socializing with him. They would occasionally make eye contact with him and giggle to their friends but he wasn't at risk of being considered a short-term or long-term romantic connection. This has resulted in his being more reserved in similar situations so he no longer has to "feel really bad about [himself] because of that."

For Julio, one major factor in choosing girlfriends at this stage in his life, during which he is conscious of selecting a potential life is religion. As a practicing Catholic¹¹, he believes that his future wife, if Trinidadian, would have to be Catholic even if she does not practice. He is willing to be more flexible if he marries a foreign national. Race however is a close second.

For Julio, the girls with whom he is seen also play a role in how his status is perceived by others. He is aware that although his primary consideration is whether or not a girl is pretty, he defines that through Western/European ideals of beauty. He wants a woman with a slim, athletic build, long legs, long straight or wavy hair, and fair skin. In an ideal world, he wants to marry a "light-skinned Latina." This blend of cultural familiarity and Eurocentric norms will situate him, in his estimation, at a whole new level of prestige.

¹¹ Julio's mother is Muslim and although his family celebrates Islamic holidays etc., he and his siblings were raised in the Catholic faith, following his father's beliefs.

Julio has not avoided dating outside of these parameters but his preferences are quite clear. He has not avoided girls of clear African ancestry, but they only play one particular role. Carefully choosing his words, he shared, “I’ve had a lot of different girlfriends, like a broad spectrum of girlfriends, whether that be Indian [or] white girls. I’ve had physical relationships with black girls too. Getting to the root of this statement was a bit tricky. Julio was trying very hard not to offend me as I was clearly of African descent.

As he pondered my questions, he began to nibble at his already chewed-up nails and cuticles and he kept crossing and uncrossing his legs. Sensing his discomfort, we left the topic for a while and after we had established a closer rapport, I returned to the statement in order to dig deeper. Julio has met black girls whom he felt were beautiful and smart, and fit all his other ideals, but skin color nullified many of these positive attributes. He was more than happy to engage in physical relationships with these girls—something our mother’s always warn us about—but he would never consider taking them to meet his friends or family. To him, a formal relationship with a black girl was a step backwards for his entire lineage (England, 2010). He aspires to improve his life circumstances and chances and a black girlfriend will simply never be beneficial in that regard. For Julio, the only way up and out is whiteness (Fanon, 1952).

Dyanis

This conversation with Julio opened me up to a level of vulnerability that I had not expected as it forced me to contemplate my own relationship choices. Like Julio, I have always had a diverse array of romantic interests, from the blue-eyed boy with the platinum soup bowl hair cut who held my hand on my first day of kindergarten, to my

first boyfriend whose dad was Chinese, to my first love who was Hindu, to my Form 4¹² boyfriend whose unfathomable eyes and flawless skin were almost the color of molasses. I definitely didn't have the issues with race in relationships that Julio had. Or did I?

My mind begins to race in a myriad of directions but the same names keep repeating themselves: Kiam, Sam, Mikael, Gary, and Joe. These are the “white boys” with whom I have spent the last twenty-three years of my life. Granted, I have spent almost twenty of those years in a community that is over 90% white, so that was circumstance, right? I've never consciously had a preference. Am I using the scattered diversity among my relationships to justify and demonstrate this lack of preference? Is there any basis to my justification or have I shifted to the defensive? Why am I defending me from myself?

As I watched Wendell's mother pull into my driveway, I felt the familiar wave of loneliness wash over me. This suburban neighborhood, with its spacious yards divided by shoulder-height brick and concrete walls, was not the place for an only child to make life-long friends. But Wendell and I were friends from school and I had known him for years. In Trinidad, schools are not zoned so Wendell and I lived miles apart. He had gently held my hand on my first day at a new school way back in kindergarten. He had been a pudgy child with platinum blonde hair that ran in a circle around his head, just brushing the tops of his eyebrows, and the kindest blue eyes I had ever seen—not that I had seen many at this point, but I remember that's how I felt. I remember feeling

¹² The leveling system in high school is based on the British system. Form 4 is the equivalent of 10th grade.

important—I can't recall if that happened at the time or if it is part of a retroactive realization—because this white boy was interested in me.

Years later, our wonderful day was coming to an end. Before we could make it to the front door, I heard my step-father's car pulling into the driveway. He never entered the kitchen and soon I was standing there alone waving goodbye. "I don't want any white boys in this house." The harsh tone startled me as I spun around to meet him. "You hear me?" I didn't respond. I couldn't respond. White boys? Who, Wendell? I looked toward my mother standing near the stove but as our eyes met she turned away from my confusion, unsure herself how to handle the conflict. "Don't let me see him here again." His softly uttered statement was punctuated by his abrupt turn as he loosened his tie and headed up the stairs.

To my recollection, that was the last time Wendell ever came by to visit. We remained friends in school, but as was common, his friends outside school were the children of his parent's friends. My step-father's response, based on his experiences with "white folk" while living in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement, still startles me and makes me cognizant of how I choose to respond to hate and prejudice.

My interest in this incident is centered on connectivity. How was this incident, which rocked the foundations of my ways of knowing and understanding the world, connected to the way I viewed race in relationships? My step-father knew I had a crush on Wendell. He gave me my first kiss on the cheek back in kindergarten and five years later, I still found his presence fascinating. I know that this experience didn't change who I liked or who I spent time with, but did it cause me to seek out relationships with

others of European ancestry in some sort of twisted, unconscious rebellion against a colonial history that even back then felt like it was limiting my options?

“You only like white boys, huh?” I remember Sweet’s tempered scowl as he responded to my decision not to go on a date with him. “No, I date people based on their personality, not the color of their skin.” I tell myself that it was the gold velour track suit, matching Kanga hat, and thick gold chains that made him undesirable in my mind. In truth, it wouldn’t matter how much money he made or what he looked like, because I simply don’t like that style. At the same time however, particularly after speaking with Julio, I wonder if I am trying to obscure more deep-seated reasons. What are the odds that a girl from the southern Caribbean would only have dated two persons of African descent in her lifetime? Granted, all the others were not of European descent, but there’s something there, right? It is difficult to question the choices of my past and I feel as if I have still barely scratched the surface. I am clearly no closer to understanding how much my perceptions of race have influenced my romantic connections but now, this churning will not rest. This questioning has sparked both my researcher’s desire to learn more about a phenomenon and my fear that what I find will expose a hidden self-hatred. That fear is paralyzing.

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But a wrapper I’m in.
Shrouded and labeled,
Contents pre-determined.
This skin is all that they see.*

Aspirations of Whiteness

Julio

Julio's mixed heritage has always presented a challenge to his self-identification. He has constantly been pulled between identifying like the white man he feels he is and the Indian man he appears to be. As we chatted about his perception of whiteness and the way it has shaped his views of the opposite sex, he began to talk openly about the idea—common but rarely admitted—of being “someone who aspires to be whiter.” Colonial ideals have always ensured greater status to persons who were able to represent, whether physically or behaviorally, the European ideal. It's not just about skin color; it's about power. In a world where lighter skin and European tastes automatically afford you greater respect, being *dark* takes on a connotation far beyond its maligned hue.

Our conversation turned to the common practice—though not yet popular in Trinidad—of skin whitening through the use of creams, injections, supplements, soaps, and cosmetic procedures. A quick Google search highlights this unfortunate side effect of colorism. Julio's eyes opened wide and his head swung in disbelief from side to side, slowly picking up speed, as we looked over news articles from Indonesia, Malaysia, Kenya, Nigeria, Brazil, China, India—and the list goes on and on—that addressed the booming popularity of skin whitening and a preoccupation with using relative whiteness as a way to escape that *dark*-ness (Fanon, 1952). How have we as brown peoples developed such a deep seated shame of the colors of our skin that we essentially try to burn it out of existence?

I have rarely met someone who is both aware of his/her feelings about the issue of whiteness and colorism and is also willing to speak of it with others. Although there is perceived shame in black/brown-ness, there is greater shame in having your treachery found out. In spite of wanting to be whiter, Julio has never been tempted by the skin creams or injections because they tend to leave a person with a gray-ish undertone that can expose one's choices to the general public. Not being able to or wanting to whiten his skin physically, Julio has instead relied on his class and circle of friends to imbue him with some of the "magic" that whiteness can bring to one's life. As both his parents attended "prestige schools" in Trinidad, they passed their legacy of membership in a relatively white circle on to their son. Julio is proud of the fact that he has diverse friends but he is equally quick to acknowledge that if someone took a snapshot of his friends either in Trinidad or in the United States, a significant majority would be white.

Physically viewing white as attractive growing up was the reason that I kinda more so tended toward that and recognized white as being people of privilege in Trinidad, historically. And it was white people who had the boats and the house in Westmoorings and blah, blah, blah. So that more so played a factor in me wanting to be associated more with white people.

Julio is remarkably cognizant of the fact that those feelings have never left him. He still seeks out white friends as a way to indirectly whiten himself in others' perceptions. He questions the effectiveness of this technique in the United States but at this point, it has become part of him. The only exceptions seem to be when wealth is a factor. As is the case in much of the world, wealth somehow makes dark-ness less

threatening. Wealth by itself can be an expeditious whitener and this is simply what he wants for his future.

Tying in to his plans for marriage and why he wants a lighter skinned wife is his desire to have a family and his hope that his children will reach greater heights in life than he was able to. This belief is universal, but color, much more so than race, is a factor in this major life decision. Although he wants a Latina wife, he knows the exact shade range that would be “acceptable”; there will be no *morenas*¹³ at his dining table.

For Julio, “There is a view of how you want your kids to look and stuff like that to an extent” and for that, you need to “marry up.” This is not a common practice per se, but it is definitely a common aspiration in many places (England, 2010). Being one shade lighter could be the beacon of opportunity that puts a child on the path to success and social mobility. Many conservative Indians in Trinidad who are practicing Hindus still use certain distinctions of the caste system from their ancestral homeland for social organization (Khan, 2004; Munasinghe, 2001) and fairer skin is usually an indicator of a higher caste. Encouraged by the code of divide and conquer implemented after Emancipation in an effort to prevent former slaves and new Asian indentured immigrants from uniting, the Indian community has historically tried to create distance between the two groups and discouraged mixing with lower castes or those of African ancestry (England, 2010). Trinidad’s significant number of *douglas*¹⁴ demonstrates the lack of success in that effort but the desire to mix with the highest caste—whites—and to ensure upward mobility for future generations is still a “hidden desire” for many as “Indian people want [a child] associated with whiteness.”

¹³ Refers to Latinas with dark skin and dark hair.

¹⁴ Pronounced *dough-glah*, this name refers to persons of mixed Indian and African ancestry.

Julio is now becoming aware of how those aspirations have shaped his perception of beauty. He has found that girls who he would otherwise find unattractive suddenly become interesting and sexually arousing due entirely to the color of their skin. On more than one occasion, because he “idealizes white skin”, he has “[gone] to a party [in the United States] and it’s like ‘Wow, she’s good looking’ but a few friends put [him] out, like, ‘Nah dog, she’s not good looking, she’s just white.’” It has taken Julio a long time to feel confident sharing this and he admits that it is probably the first time he has said many of these thoughts aloud. Our communal fear of *dark*-ness paints whiteness through a rose colored lens and perpetuates the shame cycle for generations to come.

Dyanis

Halfway through one of our conversations, my phone rings and with that a picture of my two year old son appears on my screen. I actually pause and have to fight to regain focus on what Julio is saying. I look at the photo of this amazing little “redman” with café au lait skin and hair that softly curls and spirals into a floppy mass around his head. In one moment I was thinking about how sad it was that brown and black people often see limited value in the color of their skin and in another, I am staring at this half-white little boy wondering if I had internalized any of those same feelings myself without ever realizing it.

“It’s a shame he didn’t get his daddy’s blue eyes.”

“At least he has good hair.”

The tiny baby squirming and wriggling in my arms was barely six months old and already he was being judged by eternal traits over which he had no control. It had never

crossed my mind even for a moment that he would have blue eyes. The odds were slim and I was just so focused on him being born healthy. I couldn't care less what color his eyes were and the first few times I heard these statements I felt a perplexing sadness for disappointing family and friends who obviously felt I should have tried harder to ensure he would be born with blue eyes. And the good hair. How I detest that too often used expression. When someone graces me with approval of my son's good hair, doesn't that gesture also indicate a belief that I have bad hair? I would think that this connotation would go the way of the dinosaurs, but comparing ourselves to all that is white is so ingrained, so entirely consuming, that we perpetuate a sense of self-loathing and dissatisfaction in each new generation.

"Too bad he got so dark. It thought for sure at first that he would be able to pass."

"His hair is getting a little curly but I think it will still have a nice, white texture."

"It would have been better for him in this country if he was a little lighter. Light enough that people wouldn't know what he was so they wouldn't know for sure he was black."

With every month that has passed, my son's skin has gotten a little darker and his hair, no longer slicked against his scalp, has gotten a little curlier. Outside my home, I would often get a sense of everyone waiting with baited breath to see how he would "turn out."

The obsession with mixed kids that can "pass" is bewildering. The genetic sequences that determine eye color, skin color, and hair texture are so variable that it is nearly impossible to predict what those children will look like or even that siblings will share similar traits. It becomes even more complicated when one of the parents is also mixed. I understand and respect their concern while being simultaneously saddened by

the obvious need. Within the past two years alone, the newspapers have been filled with headlines announcing the unfair harassment, detention, and murders of people of color. I mourn those young men and women whose lives were unjustly ended—either by death or incarceration—and I fear for my son. I fear that the color of his skin will one day get him slammed into the ground or onto a car without warning. I fear the unkind words waiting to spew from the mouths of those filled with hatred and ignorance. I fear that someone will stand silently and watch life drain from his body—or worse yet, take it from him themselves—without sympathy, regret, and with no thoughts of kindness and humanity, because he is just a few shades too dark. I fear these instances more than skinned knees and chronic illness because as common as these are, in the current racial climate in the United States, he is more likely to face hatred and fear from others who see his very existence as a threat to their ways of knowing and understanding the world.

From this point of fear, I understand Julio's aspirations for his children. It would be liberating to live without the burden of this fear. My partner worries too about teaching our son how to live in a society that will likely only acknowledge his African ancestry and the negative stereotypes ascribed to it over generations. As a "white, country boy" he also worries that he doesn't possess the tools to teach his son some of the coping skills he might need because he himself has lived free from those burdens.

My teenage cousin was pulled over for the first time just last week and my first instinct was to blurt out "Remember, don't ever reach for your pockets or your phone." Should this really be the focus of a teenage boy reveling in his first taste of independence? This label of blackness that has been stamped on my son's head from

the moment of his birth has already shaped his life journey and it is my job to teach him to love that skin and to know that alone does not define him. It is my job to break the cycle.

*What is my skin
But a wrapper I'm in.
Shrouded and labeled,
Contents pre-determined.
This skin is all that they see.*

Revelation

This piece represents the beginning of what will be a laborious journey. My interrogation of my own perceptions of whiteness will likely lead me down a path I am not sure I am yet ready to traverse. But it must be done. I feel compelled as a researcher to delve deeper and through the use of critical autoethnography, I can reach down into my very soul to uncover that which I may have hidden from myself for over thirty-five years. This exploration goes beyond my need for self-understanding and catharsis and through it I seek to lend voice to the soft, secretive whisper that is the interaction of whiteness with the Caribbean body and mind.

As I reflect on my conversations with Julio, I ask myself “what does all this mean” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 86)? My mind wanders to the systemic inequities, sociocultural challenges, and current political strife that are founded on our internalized definitions of whiteness. As a community, we have to unblock our eyes, ears, and mouths, and challenge ourselves to do better so that future generations do not face the same visceral turmoil and exoticism of the white Other. It means that there is more to be

done and to be understood. It means that as a people, we may be able to reach a point at which every aspect of our being is not held up to an unattainable standard of quality and perfection; we do not always have to position ourselves relative to whiteness.

Whiteness is a performance that goes beyond a white body. It is a structural, cultural, and experiential “locus of power” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 5) that reflects a position of social dominance through “high status cultural signals” (Levine-Rasky, 2013, p. 118). In the Caribbean in particular, “whiteness is related to class, social standing, and economic power, and these are as significant for racial categorization as skin color, if not more so” (Tate & Law, 2015, p. 89). Our understanding of whiteness as a nation and as a region needs to be challenged, not only in the realm of academics, but also on the ground where it really matters and where it can foment change.

Julio’s awareness of his own whiteness—or lack thereof—is central to his experience as a young Caribbean national and also to his experience navigating the racial dynamic dominating U.S. discourse. My own lack of awareness is unsteady and troubling. These conversations with Julio shook me to my core and just the simple act of combing my hair has now become a landmine of uncertainty. But, unlike some others, I have a chance to make a difference. I am relatively young and I am open to change. I also have a young son who is still learning his way through the world. As a community, that is where we will have to begin. Through awareness, education, and the development of understanding—an odyssey I myself have just begun, we can create space for a new generation to challenge the veneration of whiteness in all its forms.

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