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Navigating My Blackness: An Afro-Caribbean International Student Experience

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The homogenization of all people of Color is problematic for international students because it is an erasure of cultural identity, experiences, and the fluidity of racial and ethnic identity development. The purpose of this article is to examine the author's personal narrative using William Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory to understand the racial identity development of Afro-Caribbean international students. This scholarly narrative focuses on the complexities the author faced while learning, living, and navigating Jamaican and Black identities during college. The author was forced into complex dialogues about his race and ethnicity, which then confined the author to negotiate his Afro-Caribbean experience and identity with American labels and definitions. Grounded in supporting literature and personal experience as an Afro-Caribbean international student, the author reclaims his narrative of being both Black and Jamaican while demonstrating how labels can be detrimental to a student's growth and development. The author discusses the implications for student affairs professionals in supporting and engaging Afro-Caribbean international students.

The current literature describes international students as a collective and homogeneous group that has little to no difference in terms of their national origin, race, and ethnicity (Sovic, 2007). The literature focuses on Asian international students when the experiences of Afro-Caribbean international students (ACIS) are entirely different because of their particular cultures and histories. In the Caribbean, ancestral lines stem from colonizers from Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and Germany, as well as slaves and indentured servants who were brought from India, Africa, and China to work on the plantations. The ancestral lines also include the aboriginal natives who were the first inhabitants of the Caribbean.

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Based on my personal experience growing up in an Anglophone Caribbean country with a multiplicity of ethnicities, it is evident to me that people can exist without blatant discrimination based on race. While racial discrimination was not prominent in Jamaica, the color of one's skin often relates to one's social class. This means that people with a lighter skin complexion are often afforded better opportunities, such as higher paying jobs, which allude to the systematic problem of colorism (Hunter, 2007). Afro-Caribbean international students may have experienced colorism before arriving in the United States, but it is less likely they would have encountered racism in the Caribbean. "Given that ACIS are citizens of rich multiracial societies, they might be likely to construct their identities based on their ethnic background rather than on fixed racial categories" (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014, p. 596). Upon arriving to the United States for college, Afro-Caribbean international students struggle with aligning themselves with the Black race or calling themselves Black. Since the idea of "race and ethnicity are not zero-sum entities" (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014, p. 596) in Afro-Caribbean cultures, these students can live a racially fluid identity, easily assuming multiple identities depending on the context or social groups they are situated in. For example, I am able to label myself as Jamaican, West Indian, Afro-Caribbean, and Black.

I argue that the use of William Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory to holistically understand the experiences of all Black-presenting students is problematic. It is an erasure of ACIS' national origin, cultural identity, life experiences, and the fluidity of their racial and ethnic identity development. It is important to get to know our students individually instead of lumping students in a group based on how they look.

My Story

Growing up in Jamaica, I always referred to myself as Jamaican and nothing else. I never described myself in terms of my race until I came to the United States for college. Immediately after arriving for college, I quickly joined the one-week summer orientation program geared towards African, Latinx, Asian, and Native American (ALANA) and international students. After that week of sessions, workshops, and outings with my peers, I became confused at the lack of distinction between international and ALANA students. All international students, myself included, were grouped into the ALANA category because of our skin complexion and there were no white presenting students attending that year. This homogenization of ALANA and international students caused me to identify as African American. I labeled myself as African American because it was established for me, and I felt like it was right based on the precedent set by orientation. Additionally, I did not truly understand what it meant to be African American or Black in the context of the United States, yet still I labeled myself

as such because I did not want to feel alienated. At the same time, this was a complete erasure of my Jamaican identity, which perplexed me. During the first couple weeks of school, I was constantly referred to as "the Jamaican" in my building, probably because I gave a speech at convocation and shared that I was Jamaican. As the first few weeks of school dwindled away, so did my Jamaican identity. People started to identify me as Black or African American, which I did not understand. I constantly had to remind people that I am Jamaican and that I am not African American. I did not completely dismiss the fact that I was Black, I just did not understand what it meant to be Black in the United States, as I never distinguished myself in Jamaica based on my race.

A few months into my sophomore year of college, I started to realize that America is a racialized society privileging White people. This realization stemmed from being dehumanized in the dining hall by a student employee and after reporting it to the dining hall manager, she said, "Welcome to the United States." There were multiple moments on campus when I was called racial slurs by students, or told by a faculty member that my work was not good enough and that I was not a competent student. It was frustrating when professors and students called on me in class to speak for the Black race because they assumed I knew everything about what it meant to be Black or African American. Although these experiences were troubling, they led me towards a better understanding of my Black identity.

During my sophomore and junior years, I began to fully engage with Black culture and my Black identity. This came as a result of participating in events hosted by the Black Student Union and engaging in discussions that focused on the experiences of Black people. As I drew closer to my senior year in college, I became more socially and politically active in issues affecting the Black community. I found that I was either thrown into conversation about "Black Lives Matter" or that there was an expectation for me to speak up because of my race. Nonetheless, I was happy to participate in these dialogues that were happening on campus because I was much more confident and secure in accepting my Black identity because of my involvement in the Black Student Union. In addition to accepting my Black identity, I also grew to embrace my fluid identity as Black and Jamaican using Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory and my own personal experiences navigating the racial climate in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory is described as "one of the most widely known and researched theories" (De Walt, 2003, p. 1) of Black identity development. This theory seeks to explain how Black people understand and conceptualize their Black identity (Helms, 1990; Lott, 2006), and how individuals develop

due to socialization (Cross, 1995; Spurgeon & Myers, 2010). This process of socialization then contributes to one's identity formation as they progress through four linear stages of development: (a) *pre-encounter*, (b) *encounter*, (c) *immersion/emersion*, and (d) *internalization* (Lott, 2006; Spurgeon & Myers, 2010).

The first stage is pre-encounter, in which one sees their Blackness as inferior to Whiteness. Race plays an important role in the daily lives of people at this stage because they may have developed anti-Black tendencies as a result of internalized racism (Reid, 2013). Individuals at this stage tend to lack knowledge about the history of race and racism in the United States; thus believe that we live in a society that is colorless (Plummer, 1995). Black people at this stage often blame Black people for their own downfall, but see Whiteness as good because of White supremacy (Cross, 1991; Wade, 2002).

I cannot say that the pre-encounter stage perfectly aligns with my experience as an Afro-Caribbean international student. My lack of understanding about my Black identity was solely due to the fact that I did not grow up in a country that required me to think about my race. There is an issue of colorism in Jamaica, but there is not a Black and White racial dichotomy like that of the United States. I do agree that I was not knowledgeable about the history of race and racism, but privileging Whiteness was not something that I intentionally or consciously did. My colorblindness upon arriving to the United States allowed me to see all people equally and not based on the color of their skin. The pre-encounter stage for me alludes to confusion and lack of awareness about the history of race and racism in the United States.

The second stage is called the encounter stage, where people no longer see themselves just as a human, unassociated with a racial group (Ford, Harris, & Shuerger, 1993). During this stage, one may start to realize that the United States is a racialized society that privileges White people. In my case, this stemmed from having unexpected and traumatic experiences of blatant racism on campus. As I continuously encountered racism from my peers, professors, and staff members, I began to move towards a better understanding of my Black identity. My experiences of rejection by people who I thought were there to support and help me navigate college were triggering and uncomfortable, but they also placed me in a state of confusion about committing to my Black identity. I was hesitant to fully commit because I was hurt by how Black people like myself were and are still treated in the United States, hence the need to cling to my Jamaican identity.

As result of the confusion which sparks questions in the encounter stage, one then begins to search for answers in the third stage known as the immersion/emersion stage. In this stage, one starts to move away from White culture and ideologies, and starts to engage with Black culture and their Black identity (Reid,

2013; Wade, 2002). Before entering the immersion stage, individuals will start to become aware of the identity from which they want to disassociate, but with lack of information about their Black identity, they struggle to assume their desired identity (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). As an Afro-Caribbean international student, I failed to understand which identity I wanted to disassociate from. I refused to let go of my Jamaican identity, which is rooted in my upbringing and at my core; I did not fully embrace my Black identity at this stage solely because I refused to give up my Jamaican culture and heritage.

Before transitioning to the fourth stage known as the internalization stage, individuals go through the emersion stage, where one starts to "[reexamine], through a more balanced and focused lens, the coalescing of the affective and cognitive aspects of Black identity. They move beyond the superficiality characterized in the immersion phase toward a more authentic understanding of Black identity" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 99). Towards the end of college, I was able to reach this stage, but as an ACIS it was difficult to move towards an authentic understanding of my Black identity because of my strong connection to my Jamaican identity. Whenever I went home, I did not have to think about my Blackness because of the lack of a Black and White racial divide in Jamaica. Whenever I returned to the United States, I started to think about my Blackness and the prevalence of racism.

This experience speaks to the fluidity of my Black and Jamaican identity, which changes based on the environment I am situated. As I hold true to both my Jamaican and Black identities, I am able to accept a multicultural perspective that focuses on both my Jamaican and Black identities (Patton, et al., 2016). At this stage, I was also able to resolve some of the conflicts I had about holding multiple truths as I began to achieve a sense of inner security with the fluidity of being Jamaican and Black (Reid, 2013). With this inner security, I became an active participant in activities, programs, and social justice work that benefited both Caribbean and Black communities (Reid, 2013; Lott, 2006; Spurgeon & Myers, 2010).

My story of being Afro-Caribbean and Black does not necessarily fit with Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory because I did not grow up in a country that privileges Whiteness and is blatantly racist towards Black and Brown people. As I became conscious of my race, I was not struggling with "feelings of anger, frustration, shame, or confusion" (Harper & Quaye, 2007, p. 129). My struggle was more of being confused about my Jamaican identity being taken away from me because of the color of my skin and how people perceived me and my daily experiences. I was not angry or frustrated with myself; I was angry and frustrated with how race and racism are perpetuated in all aspects of U.S. culture, institutions, and beliefs. I was also angry and frustrated by the continued silencing of my Jamaican identity.

These experiences allowed me to have a stronger pride for my country and its culture, but they also made me resent being in the United States. As I continue to acknowledge and accept the multiple identities I hold, the last stage of Cross' (1991) nigrescence theory does not signify the end of becoming Black for me. Instead, it challenges me to continuously learn to accept the intersectionality of my Jamaican and Black identities.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

It is important for student affairs professionals not to place ACIS and Black students who were raised in the U.S. at the same identity development levels (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014). As stated by Malcolm and Mendoza, "it would be foolhardy of the university to further homogenize all international students and characterize their navigation of their personal identities in such a homogenous grouping" (2014, p. 598). ACIS and Black students may have similarities in terms of how they look and how they navigate racial tensions on a college campus, but uniformly grouping students has the potential to have a negative impact on their mental wellbeing (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014).

The use of theory can be helpful since it helps student affairs professionals understand how students grow, develop, and navigate college. Conversely, the persistent use of theory can hinder getting to know and understand distinct experiences of each individual student. Until this is understood, student affairs professionals will continue to negatively impact their students' growth and development. I am not arguing that student affairs professionals should stop using theory. Instead, my argument is that we should engage our students in conversations about how they seek to define, understand, and accept their identities. For ACIS, this means giving them the opportunity to define and interpret their Blackness, instead of forcing theory and the U.S. way of thinking on them.

Getting to know students individually will help student affairs professionals tailor their approaches towards creating opportunities and programs for students to further explore their multiple intersecting identities (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Relying on students to educate student affairs professionals is problematic, hence the need to have meaningful conversations with students. We as student affairs professionals must also seek to educate ourselves about the students we are working with. A student affairs professional who finds time to understand the experiences of Afro-Caribbean international students will know and understand that we may not choose to self-identify as Black upon arriving in the U.S. This is not because we are buying into Whiteness or that we have a hatred towards our race. Instead, this is because we are not from a country where people self-identify on a Black and White racial dichotomy (De Walt, 2013; Davis, 1993; Gordon, 2000; Harris, 1995; Mills, 1998).

Conclusion

Accepting my Black identity has been a journey filled with denial, confusion, and anger, but I am proud of the person I am today. I have grown to accept that I am both Jamaican and Black. My Jamaican heritage and culture will always be rooted in how I define my Blackness in the context of the United States. Being Jamaican and Black will also continue to be a fluid identity that I will continue to navigate. Reflecting on my journey, I wish I was allowed to develop my own Black racial identity instead of people imposing it on me through their lack of understanding and awareness. My Black identity has been a learning experience, which means I will continue to grow and understand the affective and cognitive aspects of my Black identity. In the age of the Black Lives Matter movement, I will continue to commit myself to political and social platforms to advance my Black community, while acknowledging the saliency of my Jamaican identity as I challenge world-views and fight for social justice (Patton et al., 2016).

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