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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Dr. Debra Smith, professor at UNC-Charlotte for supporting me and pushing me to explore writing an auto-ethnography. You are my inspiration, and I am ever so grateful to have you as my mentor and confidant.

Not all Skinfolk are Kinfolk: The Impact of the Miseducation of Black Homogeneity in America

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Abstract

The idea of a need for oneness in the Black community at large has been unrefuted and celebrated. This notion has been supported by many popular figures and paradigms, in particular, the Pan Africanism paradigm, which calls for the unity of all Black people regardless of origin, on all levels and aspects of life. In this research the author aims to show that the assumption of homogeneity in the Black community is the root of tensions in the Black community between African Americans and Black immigrants. Through an autoethnography, the researcher a Black immigrant living in America argues that negating cultural differences and adopting the motto of the need for uniformity may actually be causing more tensions between the African American community and the Black immigrant community, which encompasses immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa. Through juxtaposing statistical data and the author's own life experiences she attempts to prove that the dismissal of vital information, such as socio-economic and cultural differences that are present amongst the two respective groups in the United states, allows for the intensification of prejudices instead of solidarity. This notion of homogeneity hinders the understanding of the manifestation racism and classism in America and abroad for all parties involved.

Keywords: Homogeneity, Black Immigrant, Black Community, Race Studies

I Did Not Know That I Was Black

I did not know that I was Black. It was not until I moved to America that I heard the word being used to describe a group of people based on African ancestry. For the first five years of my life I grew up in Haiti. In Haiti there were not many people of European descent that I knew of, and the only ones that I knew were my primary school principals. The principals were called *blan*, which meant white in Haitian Creole, and is also used to describe those of a lighter complexion. Even though we called them *blan* we never called ourselves Black, or in Creole, *nwa*. When one referred to someone as *nwa* in Haiti, it would be in reference to someone with a rather dark complexion, but not as a word in reference to ancestry or something that we identified with as a people. The word Black in Haiti was just a color, it did not signify a cultural unity amongst us, nor was it a word that we used to refer to ourselves. Black was just a color, and we were just Haitian.

Nevertheless, my childhood in Haiti soon came to an end. Due to safety reasons my family and I had to move to America. Truth be told I thought America was only temporary. When my father dropped me off at my first day of school, it did not register to me that this was my new home. I recall that on my first day of school, I was shocked at the many *blans* that I had seen. I remember turning to the kids that I saw had more color to them, and began to speak Haitian Creole, the kids looked at me with confused faces for they knew not of the language I spoke. I assumed that anyone who had a darker complexion was Haitian or knew how to speak Haitian Creole, but at five years old with barely twenty words of English in my vocabulary I had slowly begun to learn that not all who looked like me came from the same place as me. I was also learning that America, was a place full of puzzling customs and social rules that seemed to be excessive.

It was not until the third grade, two years after my arrival, that I began to understand American customs and protocols. However, there was one thing that my eight-year-old mind could not fully understand, which was the concept of race/ethnicity. I remember seeing questions about race/ethnicity on my standardized test sheet and how it asked of me to fill in the bubble that was most appropriate for me. I did not fully understand what it was asking, so I asked my teacher exactly what that meant, and he explained to me that it was basically where your family was from originally. Following that explanation, I looked for the Haitian option but I could not find it. So, I did the next reasonable thing an eight-year-old could foresee to do. I saw the Black/African American option and skipped right over it to fill in the Pacific Islander option. I did this because I knew that Haiti was an island, which meant that I was an islander, and I figured that was what Pacific Islander meant. I also reasoned that I obviously was not the color Black, and that I definitely was not American nor was I African, so I could not have possibly chosen the Black/African American option.

Finding Out That I Was Black

Finding out that I was Black, and fully understanding what that word meant in the context of America happened in middle school. I went to a middle school that was mostly minorities, comprising primarily of African Americans. This was new for me because majority of the elementary schools that I attended were diverse and comprised of students from all different backgrounds and races. Middle school was where I learned the full history of African Americans. Through history class I put together that at the basis of being Black was -no matter how far removed you were from Africa- being of West African Ancestry. I also learned that being Black had a lot of other implications that came with it. In class, we learned about things such as Pan-Africanism, and how one of the major sentiments in the Black community was the need for all

Black people to come together and fight against the common evil that we all experienced, which was the racism that oppressed us in all manners of life. Regardless of origin we were all Black, at the root we all had the same issues, we were brothers and sisters, and we needed to support one another. Just as I had quickly learned all of that in class, I had quickly unlearned all of that through how reality actually presented itself.

Of all the things to be unlearned, the first to go was the “brother and sister” idea and how we shared this closeness to one another. My peers agreed with the idea that we as Black people were all brothers and sisters, and that we needed to be one. But I did not reciprocate those same feelings. Generally speaking, a research done by Storr (2009) shows that African Americans at large tend to be more racially conscious than ethnically conscious than their immigrant counterparts. Meaning that they tend to see Blackness as a whole, and not on a cultural individual basis. In similar fashion, a study conducted by Thornton et al. (2013) found that African Americans were more likely than Black people from the Caribbean to indicate that they feel close to all Black people living in America regardless of origin, while those from the Caribbean did not report the same sentiments in return.

I always thought that it was ironic that my peers preached this idea of closeness or even oneness, when they treated me like an outsider, because to them I did not fit in their description of Blackness. Through being made fun and bullied because of the way that I spoke and acted, I quickly learned that there were more definitions of Blackness than just simply having the same ancestry. Being Black, as one article puts it, can also be perceived by how you look and sound (“What Does it Mean,” 2010). To my classmates I spoke like a “valley girl,” which meant that I was attempting to fight the fact that I was Black or my Blackness. At school I had to come to understand and accept that I was an outsider, because I did not watch the shows that everyone

watched, I did not eat the food that they ate, and I did not have the same accent as they did. To my peers I talked and acted “white,” I was different from them.⁹

A typical phenomenon for African American youth is the belief in race-acting or acting in the way that is deemed most appropriate for your race. As Thelamour and Johnson (2017) put it :

For African American adolescents, *race-acting*, or beliefs about what it means to behave as a member of a particular racial group (Burrell, Winston, & Freeman, 2013), is part of youth peer interactions. Neal-Barnett (2001) described “acting Black” more specifically as “generalizations of the significance and meaning of being Black” (p. 77) and, as such, it is a commonplace feature of African American interactions among adolescents (Kunjufu,1988). Hence, lacking an understanding of the meanings of these concepts might undermine immigrant youth’s interpersonal relationships with their African American peers.

So, in turn what that meant for me is that my peers and I had a cultural misunderstanding. I did not understand what they meant by my not acting Black, and they did not understand that I was socialized differently than they were. Research shows that immigrant youth and young children in general are racially and culturally socialized through various agents such as their peers and parents. Thelamour and Johnson also point out regarding socialization processes that, “these socialization processes align behaviors and attitudes with culture and have implications for identity development.” So, in my own experience as a result of how I was socialized in a Haitian household and community, I was not accustomed to African American culture and neither did I identify with it. Nevertheless, my peers not taking into account cultural differences presented itself as a disadvantage to me. To my peers if you were Black but not exactly like them you were an anomaly of the sorts.

The second thing to be unlearned about being Black was the notion of common Black issues/experiences, especially with regards to finances and socioeconomic status. For instance, most of my classmates were shocked to find out that my family and I lived in the suburbs, because they thought that most of the student body lived in smaller communities and apartments near the school. My peers equated the house that I lived in with me being rich, but I thought nothing of it. The neighborhood that I lived in had a Homeowners Association (HOA), a neighborhood pool, and comprised of two-story homes with large backyards. While my peers were in awe of my house, I thought that my house was rather modest, and the bare minimum for all working class Americans. I believed this because my father would say if he could afford our home being an immigrant, a taxi driver, and not even within a decade of living in America then there is no reason that people who lived in America all their lives could not do exceedingly more. But through the lives of my classmates, I was quickly learning that not all Black people in America could afford the same luxuries, even though society painted it as if we all shared the same socio-economic realities.

In fact, a study done by Manual et al. (2012) shows that when one compares the socioeconomic status of African Americans with that of Black immigrants, those from the Caribbean in particular, Black people from the Caribbean often owned homes and had a higher income than African Americans. Furthermore, research done by Hamilton (2014) shows that earning trajectories of Black immigrants also speak to the heterogeneity of the Black experience in America. The earnings of Black immigrant men, especially those who come from anglophone Caribbean countries, will either line up or slightly surpass the earnings of native-born Black men in America after living in the U.S. for 20 or more years. As for Black immigrants who originate from anglophone African countries, they are expected to completely surpass the earnings of native-born Black men. Most importantly Hamilton notes that selective migration and an immigrant's

native tongue have a lot to do with future earning trajectories, citing that those who immigrant from anglophone countries have more positive and stronger earning trajectories than immigrants who do not originate from anglophone countries.

In all, everything I learned in middle school seemed like one big contradiction. I saw no unity amongst my peers, and I definitely saw no common experiences in reality. I felt like I was being lied to about what being Black meant, and because of that I hated being Black in America. I felt like I was grudgingly allowing myself to be put into a category that I did not feel like I belonged to. What good did being Black do for me? It imposed rules and standards of being that did not allow me to be myself. I just wanted to be Haitian, not Black, but Haitian. I would have given anything to just be recognized as such, because if I was recognized as Haitian, I thought, maybe I would not have to endure the taunting of other children who were supposed to be my “brothers and sisters” for my name, mannerisms, and the way I spoke. Maybe if they saw me as Haitian and not Black, they would not expect me to be the same as they were. Being Black did not mean that we shared the same culture, sentiments, and socioeconomic struggles. It did not mean that we understood or even valued each other.

In middle school, to me being Black meant that I could not be different, and that I had to fall in line with whatever was socially acceptable with what being Black was, not allowing much space for individualism. This idea of one big Black universal cultural understanding and sharing felt limiting and constricting to me. Similarly, Felipe Smith (2003, p. 122) in his excerpt in the book *Problematizing Blackness: Self-Ethnographies by Black Immigrants to The United States*, explains the same feelings of constraint in better words. “Black cultural nationalism, however, as did the other nationalism I could never quite adjust to, demanded too great a surrender of my individual experience and sensibilities.”

Black Homogeneity

Black homogeneity seemed as if it was an expectation. If you dared to defy it, you would be ridiculed. But who created the expectation? I blamed Black Americans. After middle school I blamed Black people in America for the idea of Black homogeneity. I blamed them for being ignorant and not taking the time to educate themselves on what it really meant to be Black and all the different types of Black people there were around the world. I reasoned how could African Americans profess that there was a need for oneness amongst Black people everywhere and that we were all brothers and sisters when they could not even take the time and bother to educate themselves on their “brothers and sisters,” abroad. I labeled African Americans as ignorant and hypocrites, but that was all until I got to high school.

In high school, as an elective I decided to take an African American history course. To my surprise upon entering the class not only was the teacher the head football coach, but he was also white. As confused as I was at the fact that the white football coach was my teacher, I decided to be optimistic and stay in the course in hopes that I would learn something that I had not learned before, and to my surprise I did. I learned something important in that class not through the class content, but through one specific interaction that I had with the teacher.

On test days in my African American history class, the teacher would give us the test and at the end he would give us an extra credit question, typically in the form of some old song from a Black artist, which we had to then either name the song or the artist. After we were done taking the test, he would then make us switch papers with our neighbors and we would grade one another's as he would shout the correct answers out loud. We had taken three tests previously and the time for the fourth test had come around. The song that he played this time for the extra credit I had not known, it sounded like it was from the 50s or during an earlier time period. After we

were done, we did the usual, we switched papers and checked off answers as he called the right ones out. The teacher then finally called out the answer to the extra credit question, many then sighed in dismay and I was one of them, because we had gotten it wrong.

Due to the fact that the extra credit question was the difference between me getting an A or a B on the test, I shot my hands up and asked him, “How were we supposed to know this song?” The teacher then replied, “You really want to know? Well, it’s because you are Black, you are supposed to know these things.” As those words were uttered from his mouth in front of the class, in an overwhelmingly majority Black class, I seemed to be the only one that took offense from what he said. Everyone else sighed in agreement with his reasoning. I, on the other hand could not let that statement be made and not have said anything. Without even raising my hand I said back to him, “Well, not all Black people are the same, and we definitely are not all from America. Take me for example, I am from Haiti and I am an immigrant. My parents listen to Haitian music not American music, so please tell me how I was supposed to know this song?” The teacher then seemed to be upset and waved his hands in the air dismissing my statement.

As I sat there enduring the embarrassment from the public dismissal of my statement, I was upset. I thought to myself why had I even taken this class in the first place, and why did I even stay when I could have left. But in hindsight, it was at that moment that I no longer blamed African Americans for perpetuating the idea of Black homogeneity. Through that incident it dawned upon me, that this is what was given to them, to us. We did not choose this way of thought for ourselves; this has been the narrative that has been taught and enforced to us, through the history books and through teachers like him.

This narrative of Black homogeneity was thrust upon us, just as the word Black was thrust upon me by those of European descent in America. In America, the privilege of being a

diverse racial group that consists of many nationalities and ethnicities, is a privilege that is only reserved to those of European descent. As better put by Mary C. Waters (1999, p.45), “Americans have generally paid a great deal of attention to ethnic differences within the white race, while treating Black Americans as if they were both a racial and an ethnic group with no interracial differences.” While those of European descent in America got to be Irish, Italian, Scottish, or German, everyone else in America was reduced to being homogenous and lacking any substantial differences that are worth noting. Black people were all African Americans, Hispanics were all Mexican, and Asians were all Chinese. The right to ethnic diversity was one of the many tools used to reinforce European cultural hegemony in America.

Audre Lorde cautions that women should not seek to gain empowerment by using the same strategies that have been used to marginalize and oppress them. She argues that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (Lorde, 2007, as cited by Gentles-Peart, 2016, p.138)

In this case, Black homogeneity was the master’s tool. It was a tool bestowed upon us by those of European descent in America to marginalize and to strip us of any cultural diversity and pride that we may have had. We attempted to use the master’s tool to connect with one another. But unfortunately, we Black people had taken up the master’s tool in good spirits not knowing that one could never truly achieve the goal of unity and cultural understanding with it in hand. It created further tensions within the Black community, and it stopped us from really getting to know each other due to the assumption that just because we were Black, we automatically understood each other, we were one. Because of this we continued to fail each other’s cultural expectations for one

another. The master's tool in our hand proved to be a double edge sword. We had good intentions with it, but we could never achieve what we wanted to because that was not its intended use.

The Issue with The Assumption of Homogeneity

Blacks all over the world often assume or expect to share enough with Blacks elsewhere to build a significant sense of unity, and such unity is understood to be essential in confronting and combating international racism. This is such a powerful expectation that emotions tend to run high when we discuss it, and few dare to critique it. And we often feel devastated or strangely disorientated and indignant when our expectations go unfulfilled.

(Wamba, 1999, as cited by Manyika, 2003, p. 80)

The issue with the assumption of homogeneity is that it creates expectations that are unrealistic and most importantly, it knows no borders. My sophomore year of college I studied abroad in Spain for a semester, and in honor of my last week in Spain I decided to meet one last time with a German friend that was living in Spain for the time being. We went to lunch and talked for hours, the conversation was deep for we talked about religion, racism, and the purpose of life. During our conversation on race, I explained to her why it was offensive to group Black people as one people and not acknowledge their differences. I remember telling her, "well, you would not say Spaniards and Germans are the same, but yet they live on the same continent." She then replied, "Heavens no! That would be an utter lie and they are not the same in the slightest bit! They have different languages, histories, and customs that they practice still to this day." I then replied, "Then why do people feel the need to say a Nigerian person and a Ghanaian person are the same people just because they are from the same continent. The reason was none other than the lack of respect for

said group of people.” I explained to her that there was a tendency among people, to overgeneralize Africa and Africans, while the same is not done for Europe. Europe gets to be a continent full of distinct countries, cultures, and people. All the while, Africa is reduced to being referred to as if it were one country, that comprised of one people, with one history, but most importantly one economic reality that plagued everyone, poverty. After my impromptu lecture, my friend told me how she never thought about those points before and how I was right.

After that conversation and many more the sun began to settle, signaling our time to go home. As we got up and began to walk to the metro, I spotted an African man -I could tell that he was of African origin due to his accent- ahead of me on the street attempting to sell fake designer watches. As it was our turn to walk by the man, he obnoxiously pushed the watches in front of our faces, we tried to walk as quickly as possible because we simply were not interested. But as we walked away attempting to ignore the man, he had said something, something that was enough to get me to stop for a moment just to make sure I heard right and to make sure that it was coming exactly out of his mouth.

“You are African!” the man shouted in anger. He repeated the statement twice. His anger I presumed stemmed from the fact that I ignored him, it was as if he thought I owed him my time or at least acknowledgement due to the fact that we might have shared the same origin. As I continued to walk with my friend, I was upset on the inside by the events that had taken place because it contradicted everything that I was attempting to tell my friend earlier about Black people not being the same or one people. Just as I had taught my friend the need to acknowledge Black cultural and ethnic individuality as a form of respect, the man I felt had perhaps undone it all. Not only was I upset by his potential undoing of my teachings, but I was also upset that he thought that I owed him something because of my skin color or my presumed origin. He was okay with

everyone else on the street not acknowledging him, but he was not okay when I did it. His logic allowed for others to ignore his humanity, while the ones who he thought were indebted to him due to ancestry owed him something. To him, it was like how dare I be an individual and not act in the way that an African should act in his eyes. Our assumed origins did not give him authority over my actions the way he would have liked, and he felt like it was his job to remind me of who I supposedly was. In short to him, never mind the fact that what he was doing was illegal, I should have been a good African and acknowledged him.

Of all the times where I mistakenly assumed that other Black people were the same as I, I was always left with this feeling of deception, then that feeling turned into embarrassment, which then finally turned into anguish towards my so-called brother or sister. The problem with the assumption of Black homogeneity is that it tore us apart more than it brought us together. Lost in thought almost missing the metro stop to my neighborhood, I reasoned that those feelings were perhaps the only things that man and I would ever share aside from our proclaimed ancestry. Feelings of deception, embarrassment, and unfortunately anguish towards one another in that moment.

As I was walking home from the metro, I thought to myself what was to blame for this now global idea of Black homogeneity? I thought this was something I only would have to deal with in America. How did it travel? Pan-Africanism and the “Back to Africa” movement, both of which were well known across the diaspora, came to my mind. These movement called for the oneness of Black people everywhere across the globe. But what they failed to realize was that these ideas sounded great in theory, but they never accounted for the differences that presented themselves in reality. Things such as different principals, customs, habits, etc. were never accounted for.

I have come to understand that the hardest pill to swallow among Black people from all across the diaspora, was the fact that it was West Africans from differing tribes that captured and sold each other into slavery. As noted by Holt and Brown (2000), Europeans had a much harder time capturing the slaves themselves, because they could not capture enough to make a significant profit. The differing West African tribes were not helpless participants in the slave trade, but they were active participants that traded guns for human bodies. Human bodies that they did not see as an extension of themselves, but merely bodies from neighboring tribes. All of this suggests that maybe they were never one people to begin with, in turn meaning that we were never one people to begin with.

In conclusion, I do believe that we as Black people need to come together to fight and remove the residues of racism, European cultural hegemony, and colonialism within our societies. But I do not think that we can ever fully take on this fight and win if we do not learn how to simultaneously appreciate our similarities and differences. We also have to ask ourselves how can we use our diverse cultures, religions, and backgrounds to create a global change. But before any of that can happen, Black people from all over must learn to accept and respect what we were not and are not, which was, and is, one people with one culture.

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