

**(Im)migrations,  
Relations, and Identities  
of African Peoples:  
Toward an Endarkened  
Transnational Feminist  
Praxis in Education**

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*I'll see some Black people, I'll think they are Africans and they can understand you, but they're really prejudiced and racists, like [when you] come from Nigeria, they'll be like, "Oh, you're African!" [in a derogatory tone] and I'll say, "What are you? You are African, because your ancestors are." But I don't think they understand the reason, like they don't appreciate their culture and they're really prejudiced against us. (Ekene, personal interview, March 2008)*

*Because that's just the way they are... They always go and be prejudiced. Even at this school, they look at you "Oh, you are African," and I say, "Yeah so are you." (Ekene, personal interview, March 2008)*

*Thank you so much for letting me take part in your study. It has made me begin to ask myself, "Who am*

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*I? An African-American or Ghanaian?" But like I told you sometimes I consider myself a Ghanaian, because I am happy to have a background, to actually be from somewhere... (Abena, participant journal entry, March 2008)*

As seen in the above quotes from Okpalaoka (2009a), in order to answer the question of who we are as African ascendant people, we need to take a closer look at the role that history, time, displacement, and geographical location have played in our migrations and the dynamism to the nature of the identities we adopt within and across national contexts. The notion of ascendancy, as it relates to African people, is attributed to Kohain Hahlevi, a Hebrew Israelite rabbi, who coined the term African "ascendant" as opposed to African "descendant" to describe people of African heritage and their forward-moving nature. According to him, the term "descendant" may imply a downward or backward moving process. In the same vein, ascendancy implies a progressive movement that calls us to consider a different language or discourse for the ways we talk about people of African origin.

Looking within ourselves and our common history to (re)member who we are is critical to confronting dominant discourses that seek to define us. But remembering who we are means that we have to address the dearth of knowledge about Africa and Africans and the African (im)migration experience in our society and in our schools. While research and the literature have kept pace with the experiences of major immigrant groups such as Asians (Takaki, 1998; Zhou 1999), Latino/as (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003), and Black Caribbeans (Waters, 1991, 1994), there is still a noticeable dearth of research about Black African immigrant children (Rong & Preissle, 1998). Rong and Brown (2002a) argued that "the lack of research on Black immigrants denies the American public and policy makers opportunities to explore the many urgent and intriguing issues concerning Black immigrants, therefore denying the public insight into the special needs of these immigrants which have been neglected" (p. 249).

The focus of this article will be on the sense of what an *African (American)*<sup>1</sup> identity could mean when viewed through the processes of migrations and fluid identities of contemporary African immigrant children as they interact with their African (Americans) peers in our schools. The purpose of this article is to use data<sup>2</sup> from a study of West African immigrant girls and their process of ethnic identity construction to support our position for new discourses and methodologies that challenge the dominant discourses surrounding the Black educational experience in our schools. This purpose can be articulated in two central questions that guide this article. First, how do we develop a new understanding of the variations of the term African and American by placing it in a global context (and the "American" in parentheses to designate those who were born of African people brought to the U.S. during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade)? Considering that the demographics of American schools continue to reflect the changing faces of immigration due to the increase in Black African immigration, this article will trouble our rather taken-for-granted notions of the term/name African (American).

Secondly, how do we acknowledge the role of temporality in current defini-

tions of who is African (American)? The tensions that exist and are represented in the voices that begin this article cannot be separated from the timing and mode of arrival of more contemporary African immigrants and African (Americans) in the U.S. and how claims are made with the label African (American). The goal of this article is to examine the issue of appropriate naming of African ascendant people in the U.S. and to examine how asking new questions of who we are might lead to a more global framework for studying identity construction and negotiation for African ascendant people in the U.S.

When we understand the way identity is being marshaled and used by African ascendant school children and the ways in which they are negotiating their identities similar to or different from existing discourses, we will begin to ask new and/or different questions of them and ourselves. Educators will be able to reconsider how classroom and school discourse might better reflect the ways that varying notions of African (American) identity impact the school experiences of the Black student. But this can only occur within a context that places African ascendant people's experiences and movement in (to) the U.S. historically. The following section both explores and troubles the notion of identity and migrations of African ascendant people in a way that seeks to better understand the fluidity of Black identities in the historical and geographical contexts that we have occupied and continue to occupy. We start by explaining some of the dominant discourses that have sought to name the reality of who we are, as African ascendant people.

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### **Troubling Dominant Discourses about African and Black Education**

Much of the dominant discourse that has framed conversations about African (Americans) and education in the literature has been couched in a narrative of inferiority, pathology and underachievement. These discourses not only frame the rank and status that African (Americans) have or do not have in society or the ways that African (Americans) are perceived in society, but they particularly shape the ways that African (Americans) are represented as problematic in educational research. There has been a "preponderance of deficit-model... research that pathologize(s) African American youth and reproduce(s) notions of African-American intellectual and social inefficacy" (Brown, 2005, p.63). The origin of deficiency discourse in education dates back to the period from the early 1960s to the 1970s when social agencies, including schools, began to engage in the pathologization of African (American) children. School desegregation was in full swing at that time and the influx of Black children into previously all-White schools led to the emergence of labels that portrayed Black children as "culturally deprived"/ "culturally disadvantaged" (Reisman, 1962), and much later, "at risk" (U.S. Department of Education, The At-Risk Institute, 1998). Although some of these terms have been discontinued in research lexicon, the discourse that still dominates is one that portrays Black children as always already less successful than their White counterparts. Most often, this "underperformance" is largely linked to their race and class.

Other discourses which have entered the conversation on the education of

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Black students have been based on racial identity theories and the implications for Black students' education. Helms' (1990) definition of racial identity emphasized the social and political implications of group membership and the subsequent effect on individual psychological functioning. As the most widely studied constructs among African (Americans), Helms' (1990) and Cross' (1995) racial identity theories explained the process by which individuals develop attitudes and beliefs about racial group membership. According to Helms (1990), racial identity theory refers to "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group...[and] racial identity theory concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership, that is, belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential group membership" (p. 3). In a society where racial group membership is emphasized, the development of a racial identity is inevitable in some form for everyone (Tatum, 1997). These notions of Black identity formation resulted in studies that illustrated a variation in the way not only Black students, but ethnic minority students self-identified and the subsequent effect of their ethnic identity on their schooling process (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1987; Rong & Brown, 2001; Waters, 1991, 1994). These studies were supported by Fuligni, Witkow, and Garcia (2005) who contended that when it comes to schooling in the U.S., ethnic minority groups are stereotyped according to their attitudes towards schooling and their academic performance. Scholars such as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) became well-known for ascribing oppositional identities to Black students from different socio-economic backgrounds when they failed to perform well academically so that they would not be perceived as "acting White."

Since Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) work, other studies have challenged the association of ethnic identity strength and academic achievement. Phinney (1992) argued that students with more developed levels of ethnic identity performed better in schools than those with less developed ethnic identity. Sandoval, Gutkin, and Naumann (1997) found a close relationship between African (American) adolescents' academic achievement and racial identity attitudes. Fuligni et al. (2005), in their study on the implications of ethnic identity on adolescents' academic motivation and achievement, concluded that the strength of their ethnic identification was relevant to their academic adjustment. Despite the mixed opinions of researchers on the influence of ethnic/racial identity development on school experience, researchers such as Banks (1993) and Rong and Brown (2001) are among those who support enhancing adolescents' ethnic identity development for better academic achievement and general school experience.

In addition, there are other discourses that specifically (and negatively) characterize Black females and womanhood as the matriarch (overly aggressive and unwomanly), mammy (obedient servant) and welfare recipient (lazy, poor, and dependent on welfare state entitlements) (Collins, 2000). All of these labels have been used to justify not only Black women's oppression, but the oppression of African (Americans) as a whole (Collins, 2000). Since schools, among other agencies, are complicit in reproducing these discourses, these stereotypes are likely to

be played out in the school interactions between African (American) students and their peers.

Whereas most of the dominant discourses discussed above have originated from European hegemonic views of African (Americans) in the U.S., many of them have also been adopted within the African Diaspora and on the continent of Africa, and have shaped the pre-migratory perceptions that many immigrant groups have of African (Americans). Some of these discourses center on stereotypes of African (Americans) held by Africans on the continent who, though they may never migrate to the U.S., have been influenced by media depictions of African (Americans) as violent and lazy. Those who do migrate to the U.S. then bring these notions of African (Americans) with them which may culminate in tense relations in the schools and society (Okpalaoka, 2009a; Traore, 2006).

In addition to the stereotypes of African (Americans) that African immigrants bring with them to the U.S. are the stereotypes of Africans held by African (Americans) in the U.S. The dominant discourses around African immigrants are that they are hungry, poor, diseased and uncivilized (Okpalaoka, 2009a; Traore, 2006). Findings from Okpalaoka's (2009a) study indicate the recurrence of statements such as:

*Eww, she's from Africa. She needs to go back where she came from... You have weird hair. You smell weird. You do stuff weird.* (Ekene, personal interview, March 2008)

*Yeah, 'cause usually what they be seeing on TV, they think that Africans just look dirty, nasty and poor... Well, when they found out [that my parents were from Nigeria], they said, "Do you see lions and tigers running across your bedroom when you're there?"* (Amanda, personal interview, March 2008)

The tensions that arise between both groups speaks to a historical and cultural disconnect and a seeming lack of kinship between African immigrants and African (Americans) in the U.S. The disconnect often leads to the former embracing a strong African identity in resistance to the stereotypes they face or to their own stereotypes of African (Americans) (Okpalaoka, 2009a). African (Americans), on the other hand, may distance themselves from the negative stereotypes that they have been taught and hold about Africans or may feel that they have lost (or never had) a connection to the continent and its people through the disruption caused by the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The U.S. has been witnessing a period in its history referred to as the fourth wave of immigration which has led to what Rong and Brown (2002b) have called the "largest racial/ethnic transformation in history" (p. 123). Among the groups that have been significantly represented in this immigration wave are Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean (Rong & Brown, 2002b). According to the U.S. census, about 2 million West Indians were living in the U.S. in 2002. Between 1965 and 1992, it is estimated that over 2.25 million people migrated from Africa to the U.S. (Kanya, 1997). Forty-seven percent of African immigrants are Black, with a third of this population coming from Nigeria (Djamba, 1999). Therefore, Nigeria is believed to be the largest sender of West African immigrants, followed by

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Ghana. This explains the national backgrounds of the participants in Okpalaoka's (2009) study from which the data used in this article was obtained.

Population projections by Edmonston and Passel (1992) placed the number of Black immigrants and their children at about 12% of the U.S. Black population by 2010. Nowhere else is this demographic transformation reflected more than in our schools. Olson (2000) argues that our schools are now confronted with educating the most racially and ethnically diverse student body in our nation's history. This includes *within and between* Black ethnic groups. How do these changing demographics affect the ways we talk about the *Black* child and education? And how do the changing demographics of Black America impact the discourse about African and American identity, considering that "the problem is that many Americans hold a monolithic view of the Black community" (Rong & Brown, 2002a, p. 252)?

Questions in educational research so far have determined answers we have constructed about Black children in our schools. But, with the movement of African ascendant people in the world today, we must also consider the variations inherent in the label African (American) and ask new questions. Might we use more global frameworks to do research with and for African ascendant people, with the understanding that both identity positions, African and African (American) are legitimate spaces from which we can do this work? Could there be simultaneity, from the local to the global, in educators' approach to classroom and school discourse when we talk about the Black student? One of the ways to extend the meaning of these identity constructions and to develop more appropriate frameworks for the work we do for and about African ascendant people in all our variations is to begin with an understanding of the variations in our (im)migration experiences and histories.

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### Unpacking (Im)migration: Troubling Black Identities through Time

*I'm proud of my heritage because most [African-American] people, they don't know where they're from...I'm from somewhere.* (Ekene, personal interview, March 2008)

In response to the negative stereotypes about her African heritage which she encountered in school, the above statement was made by a first generation African immigrant girl to distinguish her immediate traceable roots to Africa from her African (American) peers whom she perceives as not being able to lay claim to similar roots (Okpalaoka, 2009a). The idea that only contemporary African immigrants "know where they're from" necessitates our troubling of the notion of what it means to be Black in our schools and what an understanding of the inherent variations in that label might mean for educators. A brief look at the origin of African (Americans) in the U.S. is important as we attempt to situate African immigrant and African (American) experiences with identity within the discussions surrounding dominant discourses in education.

The Trans-Atlantic slave trade, beginning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century saw the largest forced migration in history, resulting in the substantive presence of African people

on North American shores (Arthur, 2000). When legal enslavement in the U.S. ended with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, immigration of Africans born on the continent of Africa was at a bare minimum. It was not until the first 50 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that African immigration picked up as a result of colonial rule in Africa (Gordon, 1998). The numbers of Africans who have settled in the United States in the past 25 years represent the largest number of Africans to have settled here in more than 200 years (Arthur, 2000). Their presence in major cities of the United States like Houston, Los Angeles, New York City, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta cannot be ignored. And the presence of their children in our schools, learning alongside and interacting with their African (American) peers, has raised questions about the meaning of “African” identity and the sociocultural context of teaching and learning.

Below, we provide a brief history of the process of (im)migration to the U.S. of African ascendant people, both historically and contemporarily. We attempt to show how two groups of people from the same continent, having arrived in the U.S. at different times in history and through markedly different means, has created a particular relationship within and between African people. We suggest that an understanding of these dynamics might push us to consider a framework for educational research with/in these populations that can “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to dominant discourses, one that is endarkened<sup>3</sup> (Dillard, 2000) and embraces notions of both transnationalism and feminism (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011) in education and research with/in this increasingly diverse school population.

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### **Background: History of African (American) Migration**

African presence in the United States dates as far back as the early 1600s when it is recorded that a Dutch ship in Jamestown, Virginia, exchanged their cargo of 20 Africans for food (Bennett, 1984). Therefore, the history of the arrival of African (Americans) to the U.S. must begin with this group that Berlin (2003) calls the “charter generation...cosmopolitan men and women of African [ascent] who arrived in mainland North America almost simultaneously with the first European adventurers” (p. 6). Although the charter generation was an indentured group, they enjoyed a freedom of movement and material acquisition in what was “a society with slaves” as opposed to “the slave society” of latter generations (Berlin, 2003, p. 55).

By the late 1600s, a switch from indentured White labor to African slave labor occurred as the “plantation generation” (Berlin, 2003) began to arrive in slave ships. Unlike the first group that had hopes of eventual freedom, these groups were torn from their homelands and brought to the U.S. to satisfy the labor and agricultural production needs of tobacco, rice, sugar, and cotton farmers. The fate of these slaves was one filled with hard labor, premature deaths, and family disruptions. Central to the experiences and identities of these slaves was the way the slaveholders explained away their domination through racial ideologies that persist today in dominant discourses still rooted in slavery including characterizations as lazy, unintelligent, mammies, and

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so forth (Berlin, 2003). By the time the slave trade ended, between 10 to 20 million Africans had been sold into slavery (Arthur, 2000).

Berlin (2003) asserts that the first indignity that African slaves experienced on arrival was the changing of their names. This marked the beginning of a loss of identity with and connection to the homeland from which they had been removed. The forced changes in identity which occurred through name and language loss became further acts of enslavement that, even today, mark the disconnect from historical kinship between continental Africans, African immigrants, and African (Americans) in the U.S. The loss of direct ties to Africa continued through marriage between slaves from across tribal groups and between conjugal unions between female slaves and slave masters. Consequently cultures and traditions mixed as new identities developed as a means of survival (Johnson, Smith, & WGBH Series Research Team, 1998). What began as a means of survival soon became a new way of “comprehending and negotiating the world” (p. 89). In Cesaire’s (1955) words, slaves’ stories became one of “societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out” (p. 340).

In forging new identities for survival, most descendants of African slaves now appear to be remotely identified with continental Africans as well as African immigrants. In the contexts in which contemporary African immigrants and African (Americans) find themselves today, each is reminded of who they once were and who they are becoming, as recent immigrants face the possibility of a loss of connection to the homeland mirrored in the historical experiences of their African (American) kinfolk. As African immigrants become aware of the hierarchical racial structure that has American Blacks at the bottom of the hierarchy, they choose whether to associate or distance themselves from African (Americans) as a means of survival and identity preservation. African (Americans), on the other hand, may also respond to an unspoken hierarchy among minority ethnic groups in the U.S. that places African immigrants at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy (Waters, 1994) by disassociating themselves from the newcomers.

Studies by Gibau (2005), Kusow (2006), Waters (1994), and Okpalaoka (2009a) support the ways racial and ethnic categories are expanding and challenging our traditional notions of race and ethnicity. Therefore, racial stratification cannot be overlooked as a factor in shaping the perceptions and attitudes of people in the U.S. (Rong & Brown, 2002a). Consequently, it is necessary to juxtapose the history of African (American) presence to that of contemporary African immigrants in order to show how time of arrival to the U.S. troubles the meaning of ethnic, racial, and national identities for both African immigrants and African (Americans) in the U.S.

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### **Background: History of African Immigration**

Following the independence of colonized African nations in the late 1950s and 1960s, many citizens of these nations migrated to the U.S. to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to facilitate the necessary task of nation-building in

their newly-formed nations (Takougang & Tidjani, 2009). This significant wave of African immigration occurred just as changes in U.S. Immigration laws were ushered in by the Immigration Act of 1965 (Arthur, 2000; Takaki, 1998). Many of the African immigrants of the 1960s and 1970s returned to Africa in anticipation of the contributions they would make to their government institutions, many of which sponsored their education abroad. However, the anticipation of taking the helms of leadership and steering the fledgling nations in new directions was fleeting. In just a couple of decades, corrupt leadership and unstable governments stemming from the quick ascent and descent of leadership soon led to the disillusionment and corruption that still plagues many African nations today.

The disillusionment with failed government coincided with the increasingly relaxed U.S. immigration policies of the 1970s and the resulting political and economic chaos facilitated the admission of African refugees, among many other nationalities, who were fleeing civil wars and despotic regimes (Arthur, 2000; Halter, 2007). The 1980s also saw an increase in the number of legalized African immigrants, many of whom benefited from the immigration reforms of 1986 (the Immigration Reform and Control Act) which made it possible for undocumented Africans living in the United States to be granted legal status through an amnesty (Arthur, 2000). In a bid to reduce the numbers of illegal immigrants in the U.S., Congress had enacted a legalization program that eventually granted legalized status to 2.8 million formerly illegal immigrants (Contreras, 2002).

The 1990 Immigration Act, which raised the limit for legal immigration to 700,000 persons a year, is responsible for the most recent wave of immigrants from Africa. In addition, the Diversity Lottery Visa Program that took effect in 1995 was a program created to increase the number of immigrants from countries with lower immigration rates and to support the diversity goal of the 1990 Immigration Act. As a result, a large number of Africans were and continue to be admitted into the United States. According to Gordon (1998), in 1995 alone, 37% of the diversity visas awarded were to Africans alone. These numbers are reflected in the number of African immigrant students in our schools today and require us to address what it means for these children to be “African” in our schools and society. In addition, these numbers require a closer examination of varying notions of the name African (American) and how these notions might play out in school interactions between African (American) and African immigrant students.

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### **Being “African” American in America’s Schools**

*You don’t look like one, so how are you African?* (Madeline, personal interview, March 2008)

Some scholars argue that physical attributes like African features and skin color place African immigrants at the lowest level of the racial hierarchy and that this causes some Black immigrants to emphasize their ethnicity or nationality in an effort to de-emphasize their race as defined by American stereotypes (Bashi &

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McDaniel, 1997). Such arguments support statements such as the one made above by an African-American peer of one of the West African immigrant girls in Okpalaoka's (2009a) study. It is a statement that is laden with the tensions which stem from the mutual stereotyping that occurs between African immigrant students and their African (American) peers, and is supported by studies which have examined what it means to be "African" American in our schools (Traore, 2003, 2006; Traore & Lukens, 2006).

With the demographic changes caused by the increased diversity of our immigrant population, and an increase in the numbers of foreign-born Black immigrants, questions about ethnic and racial identity, with regards to Black immigrants, have come to the fore. Also pushed to the fore is the resulting tension in our schools between African immigrants and their African (American) peers. Kusow (2006) shows how the increase in non-White foreign born immigrants to the U.S. draws attention to the fact that these newcomers bring national, racial and ethnic identities with them. Therefore, researchers need to look beyond the meaning of racial categories from the historical binaries of Black and/or White to a situation of multiple, hybrid and fluid identities (Gilroy, 1993). The ways that African immigrant children choose to identify, similar to or different from their African (American) peers is evident in studies that have tried to address the implications of the increasing presence of African immigrants in schools (Okpalaoka, 2009a; Traore, 2003, 2006).

Okpalaoka (2009a) reveals how her participants learned to wield their identity in various contexts, thereby countering the assumption that they were passive participants in their ethnic identity construction. In a study of eight African (American) and nine African students at an inner-city high school in a large metropolitan city in the U.S., Traore (2006) found that there was a prevalence of negative images of Africa and Africans among the African (American) student population. In another study, Traore (2003) attributed the "debilitating stereotypes" (p. 247) of Africa that her African (American) participants had to the media who continues to perpetuate images of wild animals, Tarzan and Africa as a "Dark Continent." Likewise, she claimed that her African participants also learned from the media that African (Americans) are violent, rude, and on welfare. She contended that the media made Africa less inviting to African (American) students by denying them "access to positive images or information about Africa and Africans" (p. 247). Traore (2006) found that the often hostile relationship between both groups of students led to each group's struggles to maintain positive ethnic and national identities. Following the intervention work she carried out to educate both groups of students about their shared heritage, Traore (2006) recommended that educators "support [students] in developing their identities free from negative stereotypes" (p. 34).

On the subject of racial identity formation among immigrant children, Rong and Brown (2002a) discovered that identities are fluid and changeable over time and in different social contexts; that Black immigrants tend to move along a continuum from a national origin identity to a hyphenated-American or American identity; and that although foreign-born Black youths are likely to choose a national-originated

identity (e.g. Nigerian or Jamaican), the length of time they have spent in the U.S. may cause them to choose a pan-national (e.g., African or Caribbean) or a pan-ethnic (Black-American) identity.

In her case study of West African immigrant girls, Okpalaoka (2009a) found that first generation Nigerian immigrants students chose to identify as Nigerian rather than African (American) because of the negative stereotypes that they and their families associated with the latter identity. These negative stereotypes echo the dominant discourses surrounding African (Americans) as discussed earlier in this article. Foner (1987) and Kasinitz (1992) explain that first-generation Black immigrants tend to distance themselves from American Black people by stressing their national origins and ethnic identities. First-generation Black immigrants may believe that accepting an immigrant nationality identity will serve as a buffer against negative stereotypes about African (Americans) (Rong & Preissle, 1998).

Okpalaoka's (2009a) study supports the notion of Black immigrants' preferences for an immigrant nationality identity as demonstrated by the participant who described switching between an African (American) and Ghanaian identity, claiming to be Ghanaian in mostly Ghanaian contexts and African (American) when she was among her African (American) peers. Her decision not to disclose her Ghanaian identity in certain contexts might also be attributed to her internalization of the negative stereotypes she encountered from her African (American) peers about African peoples (Okpalaoka 2009a). Having experienced remarks about her uncivilized African background, and wielding the characteristics of not "looking African," this young woman chose to "pass" as African (American) when it was to her benefit to do so.

This situation speaks back to the dominant discourses that exist between African immigrants and African (Americans) in our mutual stereotyping and which leads both groups to identify as similar to or different from the other. Understanding the position of empowerment from which this participant could name her reality and identity when and how she chose to is significant because it could help direct the dialogue between educators, African immigrant and African (American) students in contexts where tensions exist. Such understanding could also inform the ways Africans and African (Americans) are portrayed in school curriculum.

The role of time in the ethnic identity conversations that African ascendant people engage in with one another is not only linked to the time and mode of their arrival to the U.S. as already described above, but also to the matter of who can rightly claim the African in African (American). When the African (American) peers of a first generation immigrant girl in Okpalaoka's (2009a) case study expressed disdain of her African heritage, she responded with the following:

*What are you? You are African, because your ancestors are... I am proud to be an African 'cause I know I have a culture; you don't.* (Ekene, personal interview, March 2008)

It is significant that a young girl, who had spent several years in the U.S. at the

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time of the study, and even centuries after slavery, would still echo the persistent stereotypes in African (American) identity that portray the African (American) as being without a history prior to the Trans-Atlantic slavery, a history that in fact is a shared history among African ascendant peoples.

Another participant echoed the same sentiments when she shared the pride she feels about her Nigerian heritage. She felt she had an advantage over her African (American) classmates because she could speak a language other than English, and her family practiced customs and traditions that are different from those practiced in the U.S. She used words like “special” and “extraordinary” to describe how she felt about the fact that she has “a background.” The notion of having “a background,” as a person of African ascent, appeared to be a covert comparison to African (Americans) who, according to the participants, do not have a culture or background.

The issue of naming as it relates to African identity apparently mattered to these immigrant girls and their peers, and it raises the question of whether school officials are aware of the complicated negotiations taking place, both individually and collectively, between and among the African ascendant young women. How will the heritage knowledge for all of the girls factor into school practices like curriculum and instruction? Models of culturally-responsive teaching that address the need for inclusive curriculum that meets the need of a diverse student population like that advocated by Gay (2000), Banks (1997), and King (2005) focus on cultural responsiveness and making the invisible visible through accurate representation of history. Gay (2000) argues that “both immigrant and native-born students may... encounter prejudices, stereotyping, and racism that have negative impacts on their self-esteem, mental health and academic achievement” (p. 18). Including their histories and experiences in the curriculum may not only improve the mental health and self-esteem of these students but help sustain conversations around what it means to educate the Black child in America.

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### **Naming and Remembering African Relationship: Talking Back through Transnational and Endarkened Frameworks in Education**

What this discussion suggests is that scholars and educators who are concerned with understanding and teaching within and amongst the varying versions and tensions of African ascendant people (particularly as many “reclaim” our names and identities) are also obligated to utilize research and teaching frameworks that are large and complex enough to embrace our *collective* African experiences. But the voices of these West African immigrant girls have pushed us to recognize even more deeply frameworks of endarkened or Black feminism that also more deeply recognize the migratory and spiritual nature of global African identity as well. Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) have forwarded the idea of an endarkened transnational feminist epistemology that is useful. Some definitions of key terms may be important here. As previously mentioned, an *endarkened feminist epistemology* (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000; 2006) articulates how reality is known when based

in the historical roots of global Black feminist thought. More specifically, such an epistemology embodies a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint from mainstream (white) feminism in that it is located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed notions of race, gender, class, national and other identities. Maybe most importantly, it arises from and informs the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African ascendant women. From an endarkened feminist epistemological space, we are encouraged to move away from the traditional metaphor of research as recipe to fix a “problem” to a metaphor that centers in/on reciprocity and relationship between the researcher and the researched, between knowing and the production of knowledge. Thus, Dillard (2000; 2006) suggests that a more useful research metaphor of research from an endarkened feminist epistemological stance is *research as a responsibility*, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry.

Our use of the term *transnational* is a literal one. We simply mean a way of looking at endarkened feminism that is beyond or through (*trans*) the boundaries of nations. But we also believe that such a look brings to bear the possibility of a *change* in our viewpoints as scholars and teachers as well. An endarkened feminist epistemology is also an approach to teaching and research that honors the wisdom, spirituality and critical interventions of transnational Black woman’s ways of knowing and being in research, with the sacred serving as a way to describe the doing of it, the way that we approach the work. Noting the distinction between spirituality and the sacred is important here. What we mean by *spirituality* is to have a consciousness of the realm of the spirit in one’s work and to recognize that consciousness as a transformative force in research and teaching (Alexander, 2005; Dillard, 2006; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Fernandes, 2003; hooks, 1994; Hull, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Ryan, 2005; Wade-Gayles, 1995). Therefore, the discussions we have undertaken in this article are a call to action. They are a call for a transformative approach to teaching and research in relation to the dominant discourses that mark the school experiences of the Black child.

It is important, here, to delineate the difference between spirituality and religion, since the meanings of both are sometimes conflated. We are not advocating for formalized religion as a theoretical framework or methodological tool, but we are speaking of spirituality as a lens through which we view the relationships between and among African ascendant peoples. In contrast to the tendency of Western thought to dichotomize the material and the spiritual, we are drawing on an African spiritual concept of community and communal well-being that trumps the individualism of Western feminist thought (Steady, 1996). Dillard (2006) describes an African worldview that “is conceived as a unified spiritual whole, that is, that one’s self-hood is understood and constituted as body, mind, and spirit and affirmed in relationship to both one’s group and to one’s creator” (p. 32). Dillard (2006) speaks to researchers and teachers having a “deep attunement” to the spiritual nature of their work and life (p. 36) or what hooks (2000) describes as experiencing “the

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sacred in our everyday lives...bringing to mundane tasks a quality of concentration and engagement that lifts the spirit” (p. 80).

Hence, we recognize that the African spiritual concept of community and interconnectedness must be brought into the conversations we are having about African immigrants and African (Americans) in the schools. Understanding this connection that extends beyond time and beyond the historical and geographical underpinnings of our journeys to the U.S. necessitates our consideration of new methodologies with which we can explicate this knowledge to students and educators. The intended result of spiritual engagement in research and teaching is a deconstruction of hegemonic epistemologies that are still used to maintain dominant discourses that continue to divide continental Africans, African immigrants, and African (Americans).

It is also necessary to differentiate the spiritual from the sacred here. When we speak of the *sacred* in endarkened feminist research, we are referring to *the way the work is honored and embraced as it is carried out*. Said another way, work that is sacred is worthy of being held with *reverence* as it is done. The idea here is that, from endarkened or Black feminist positions, the work of teaching and research embodies and engages spirituality and is carried out in sacred ways. Thus, we believe in the notion of using both spirituality and sacredness to explore, more globally, the meanings, articulations and possibilities of an endarkened feminist epistemology and viewing research as sacred, spiritual and relevant practices of inquiry for Black women on the continent of Africa and throughout her diaspora. Mostly, we are suggesting that both spirituality and the sacred are embedded fundamentally in the very ground of inquiry, knowledge, and cultural production of Black women’s everyday lives and experiences and that it is this understanding that helps us to appreciate the radical activism of Black feminism transnationally, what we see in this paper as young girls wielding identities both to open possibilities, to structure and construct identities and to even exclude others relationally from heritage and cultural connections. This seems particularly important to studies that focus on the role of gender among African ascendant girls, regardless of their place on the globe.

We put forth several considerations to teachers here, important to the ability to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to dominant discourses about who African “women” (in this case, young women) are and to issues of identities and their meanings amongst African people through our curriculum and pedagogies. These questions suggest that as we theorize from/through endarkened transnational epistemologies, we might also shift our gaze and engagement to embrace a more sacred (reverent) understanding of our relationships with/in endarkened spaces of womanhood and feminisms. In other words, we put these questions forward as representative of an endarkened transnational praxis, a way to see operationally what types of questions might move our discourses and our teaching and research forward, towards an inclusive and relevant education *for all* African ascendant people. Here are the central questions:

**Question No. 1: What does it mean to be an African woman?**

Endarkened transnational research acknowledges that the lives of African ascendant women are intertwined and interconnected, given our shared legacy of oppressions on the African continent and in the African diaspora. As mentioned throughout, this awareness does not discount the ways that temporality shapes Black women's experiences (Okpalaoka, 2009b). Neither does this awareness discount the notion that there are variations of feminisms that reflect the varied nuances of oppression manifested in women's specific historical, cultural and geographical locations. The disruption of African ascendant peoples' lives through enslavement, colonization, and apartheid across temporal and geographical boundaries only serves to connect us across these boundaries. A respect for the particularities of Black women's understandings and embodiment of cultural norms, geographies and traditions must be reflected in our research and work of inquiry in education.

If we use the examples of the young women's voices in the Okpalaoka (2009a) study that we've cited throughout this article, how can the knowledge of the relationship between continental Africans, African immigrants, and African (Americans) be utilized in our schools, and how might the knowledge of the tensions between the particular students in the study have been crafted and used by the teachers of these children? The common practice in our schools is to relegate lessons about African presence in the U.S. to a few pages of history or cursory mention throughout the year, except during Black history month. Moving conversations about African ascendant peoples beyond a compensatory approach to inclusion in the curriculum (Crichlow, Goodwin, Shakes, & Swartz, 1990) whereby a few token African ascendant individuals or events are highlighted in textbooks as being representative of a people, we are calling for a broader scope of inclusion, an approach that is both emancipatory (Crichlow et al., 1999) as well as transformative (Banks, 1996).

Current efforts at celebrating cultural differences through cultural fairs and exotic foods and customs are a first step, but schools cannot stop here. In addition to curriculum revisions discussed above, schools could create forums where African and African (American) students come together to share openly about the stereotypes they hold about each other. Schools should be challenged to move beyond the foods and festival approach to understanding other cultural and ethnic groups and focus on teaching what it means to be African or African (American) both historically and contemporarily. Transformation of ideas, school relations and school culture might occur, not only when students see the connection between Africans who arrived in the U.S. as slaves and contemporary African immigrants, but when the dominant culture and discourse begin to reflect this knowledge in school practices.

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**Question No. 2: What is the sacred nature of African women's experience?**

At the core of Black feminism (Collins, 2000; Steady, 1996) and endarkened feminism (Dillard, 2006) is the recognition of the expertise that we, as Black

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women, gain through our lived experiences and specific to our lived conditions. An approach to endarkened transnational feminist teaching and research is one in which the researcher/teacher and the researched are engaged in a mutually *humbling* experience, where each understands our limitations in speaking *for* the other. An endarkened transnational feminist epistemology and methodology recognizes that there are multiple experiences outside of one's own. Therefore, the role of teacher/researcher as "expert" will only serve to hinder the liberation of those with whom we engage and the cultural and spiritual knowledge that is inherently valuable to *both* of us as human and spiritual beings. The West African immigrant girls in Okpalaoka's (2009a) study reported that the use of culturally-responsive pedagogy by the teachers impacted the girls' school experiences to the extent that they appreciated the coverage that Africa received in the curriculum and their role as experts on Ghana and Nigeria which reinforced the pride they felt about their ethnic backgrounds. An endarkened transnational feminist perspective is also committed to how we "hear" the depth of meaning in the experiences of the Black children we teach.

We argue here that hearing the depth of meaning in these stories is a spiritual act and the position we assume in the hearing is sacred. The experiences of African immigrants who, perhaps for the first time, become members of a minority group upon arrival in the U.S. and struggle with acceptance from African (Americans), and the experiences of African (Americans) who are reminded by African immigrants of their lost connection to the continent, are legitimate experiences that should impact the ways knowledge is created and transmitted in schools. Children from both groups are experts at their own lives and should be invited as co-constructors of knowledge in the classroom experience. Only then might they begin to see the connected stories and experiences that have spanned time and geography.

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#### **Question No. 3: How do we recognize African community and landscapes in the work of teaching and research?**

The South African concept of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are") and the Ghanaian (Akan) concept of *Funtummireku-denkyemireku* ("We have a common destiny") embody the need to recognize the powerful and omnipresent role of community from an endarkened transnational perspective. Contrary to Western thought that seeks to elevate the individual above the community, researchers and teachers committed to an endarkened transnational feminist praxis are also committed to knowing another's stories through both telling one's own and through the sustained relationship that such dialogue requires. This is the work that researchers like Traore (2003) and Okpalaoka (2009a) are engaged in, continually unpacking the complexities of African ascendant women's lives. From this standpoint, our work as teachers/researchers has as part of its purpose to make better conditions that may not mirror our own. In other words, while we recognize the specifics of the identities within and amongst African ascendant women, as long as some form of oppression is present within our collective reality, we all must engage in the struggle

for freedom from oppression and full humanhood. We are in a collective struggle for liberation regardless of the specifics of our conditions. The young women whose voices we heard in this article, their African (American) counterparts, and all young African women, join a long legacy of struggles to define ourselves in all of our complexity—and brilliance. An endarkened transnational feminist praxis works beyond self to recognize the dynamic and shifting landscapes and configurations of identity and social location of groups.

By foregrounding spirituality as a critical component of an endarkened transnational framework, we speak to its transformative power in changing lives as well as connecting all involved to a notion of humanhood that transcends the identities we choose or the names we call ourselves. Educators who are social justice practitioners can empower students through an understanding that human suffering is a global phenomenon. Rather than detach themselves from the images that they had of Africans as poor, hungry, backward and diseased, the African (American) students in Okpalaoka's (2009a) study could have linked their struggles as African (Americans) in the U.S. to the social, political and economic conditions in Africa that have led to such images. Educators could use such discussions as a springboard for action in ways that will engage the students in self-affirming and humanitarian work.

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**Question No. 4: How, within our teaching and research, is body, mind, and spirit engaged in the work?**

Endarkened transnational feminist research is research and teaching that makes space for mind, body and spirit to be a part of the work. It invites the whole person of the researcher and the whole person of the researched into the work, knowing that the mind, body and spirit are intertwined in their functions of maintaining the well-being of the individual and community. The place of the sacred in endarkened and transnational feminisms requires radical openness, especially on the part of the researcher or teacher, who understands deeply that her/his humanity is linked with that of the people s/he studies *with*. The act of sharing with those who have been silenced, marginalized, displaced (from homelands) and denied heritage knowledge (including cultural traditions, languages and social practices) is a spiritual task which embodies a sense of humility and intimacy. Further, a sense of reciprocity is fundamental from this epistemological space, a sense that the teacher and researcher and the student and the researched are changed in the process of mutual teaching and learning the world together.

As we examine the young voices in this article and the complicated movements and identities of African ascendant people, we must be able to imagine curriculum, pedagogies, knowledges, and inquiry practices that are befitting the cosmopolitan (Appiah 2006) nature of our students, the limitations of accurate historical knowledge, and the boundaries that hegemonic, racist, sexist, and xenophobic discourses have placed on our minds, bodies, and spirits and of those whom we study and teach. In schools where classroom practice is transformative, how can teachers be open about the ways they have been impacted by systems of oppression, regardless of

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their identities? Rather than separate mind and spirit from the embodied self that they present in the classroom, teachers should enter the conversation as whole beings (hooks, 1994) who can empathize with their students' experiences, realizing that we are all affected by struggle and oppression, whether we are the oppressor or the oppressed (Freire, 1970). Such radical openness calls for "a commitment to a spiritual life that... requires conscious practice; a willingness to unite the way we think with the way we act" (hooks, 2000, p. 77).

Embracing and exploring endarkened transnational and Black feminisms also point to the ways that epistemologies, which have been marshaled in dominant discourses about African ascendant people, have still not answered the deeper, spiritual questions that undergird many cultural phenomenon, the persistent social problems of equity and justice, the difficulties of community and solidarity and the complex nature of identity and African personhood.

As we end this article, we reflect on the questions that have been raised here as to how a sense of the variations and tensions in African (American) identity, and the asking of new questions of dominant discourses can inform school praxis. We have explored an endarkened transnational framework as a medium for transformative discourse, teaching and research and as our contribution to the necessary task of confronting dominant discourses which are reflected in the tensions described in this article. We will end by pointing to future directions for the work ahead of us. As our schools continue to reflect the demographic makeup of the larger society, we have the responsibility of broadening our concept of what it means to educate the *Black* child today. Older definitions of African (American) may no longer hold as we consider what the processes of identity construction might mean for second, third and fourth generation African immigrants as they interact with their African (American) peers and as these peers make their own migrations in the world. New conversations will be needed, and our worldviews broadened, as we continue to address recurring issues around dominant discourses in education, especially regarding curriculum reform, culturally responsive school practices and their role in the transformative education of the Black child.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A writer uses parentheses to denote or mark off explanatory or qualifying remarks. We used them here to identify those persons of African ascent who were born to parents who are direct ascendants of Africans brought to the U.S. through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This representational move is to highlight the often ignored African heritage connections that still exist between African (Americans) and those throughout the African continent and the diaspora.

<sup>2</sup> The data used in this article is mostly from personal and group interviews conducted by the co-author, Chinwe Okpalaoka, from February-March 2008. Four adolescent girls of Nigerian and Ghanaian ascent were interviewed for the study. Additional sources of data were the journals kept by the participants during the study.

<sup>3</sup> By using the term "endarkened" in *endarkened feminist epistemology*, Dillard (2000; 2006) articulates how reality is known when placed in the context of the historical roots of

global Black feminist thought. It is a term that plays on the concept of enlightenment while distinguishing itself from mainstream (White) feminism in its location at the intersections of race, gender, class, national, and other identities.

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