Current Issues in Education

Internal Struggle, External Success: Navigating an Urban Education Setting with a Wayfarer Identity

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Abstract: This autoethnographic study narrates the journey of an Afro-Caribbean female educator navigating an urban educational setting in the United States. Using Cross's (1991) Nigrescence model and Wang's (2022) framework for transnational identity development, this research examines how racial identity development, immigration, and socialization shape the personal and professional experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. This study focuses on the researcher's perspective on an urban educational setting over seven days; however, personal narratives, situated in both the past and the present, are included to provide supplemental, more comprehensive context. Thus, the complex process of racial identity development among Afro-Caribbean immigrants and its influence on adaptation and lived experiences within various aspects of U.S. society is emphasized through thematic analysis and narrative storytelling. Additionally, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on Afro-Caribbean immigrants by highlighting their unique and layered identities within the broader discourse on race, education, and migration.

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Introduction

Rose-Colored Glasses

I moved to the United States in the summer of 2005, eager to reunite with my father, and even more excited to live in America. Growing up in the Caribbean, I was exposed to American culture primarily through television and radio. Through these media, I developed a rose-colored view of life in America. The thought of constantly being around White people intrigued me, as I had little to no contact with them on my home island. The idea of my new home that I imagined through these rose-colored glasses created a premature eagerness to assimilate, and a very vulnerable child who would soon learn the reality of living in the United States as a person of color.

A Hasty Assimilation

After moving to the United States, my Creole accent and dialect slowly disappeared and evolved into American vernacular. My understanding of Patois and cultural memories grew vague each year. One could not differentiate me from an African American – I made the distinction only when asked or deemed appropriate. I found myself grappling with the idea of belonging. I knew that I was different, but there was not much evidence to prove the difference between myself and my African American peers. Additionally, although my formative years were spent in a country where race was not salient, I was now forced to confront my racial identity in my new home. I struggled with the notion that I would be treated differently solely because of it.

Nevertheless, I have continued to achieve external success despite facing the realities of living in the United States. My parents, both Jamaican, never subscribed to racial stereotypes, thus pushing me to perform at the highest level in all educational contexts. I graduated at the top of my high school class, pursued undergraduate and graduate degrees, and am currently in the final stages of earning a terminal degree. Over the years, I have developed a passion for education to help my students achieve the same levels of success, and I have held several roles in the profession.

Literature Review

Caribbean Immigrants and Race

Identity Development in the United States

Many scholars have examined the identity development of Caribbean immigrants within the racialized context of the United States (Rong & Brown, 2002; Waters, 1996, 2000; Wilson, 2009). Leaving a country with a lower salience for race and moving into a context with roots in a racial hierarchy forces Caribbean immigrants to make a series of choices regarding their racial and ethnic identity. Rong and Brown (2002) describe the identity development of Caribbean immigrants along a continuum from "a national origin identity, to a hyphenated-American or an

American identity" (p.258). Waters (1996) unpacks Caribbean identity development by delineating three paths: 1) American identity, 2) ethnic identity, and 3) immigrant identity. The American identity is adopted by Caribbean immigrants who regard their ethnic identities as unimportant to their self-image (Waters, 1996). Ethnic identity is characterized by those who emphasize the prevalence of their ethnicity and agree that strong differences exist between Caribbean and American Blacks (Waters, 1996). Those who subscribed to ethnic identity also maintained attitudes of elitism, holding beliefs that their Caribbean background made them superior to American Blacks. Caribbean immigrants often differentiate themselves from their American Black counterparts as a means of avoiding downward mobility and accessing freedom from typical Black stereotypes (Waters, 2000; Wilson, 2009). Finally, immigrant identity is characterized by individuals who do not feel significant pressure to make their ethnic identity known (Waters, 1996). This identity is often maintained by those who have a strong desire to return to their home country, frequently visit friends and family there, and do not view their move to the United States as permanent (Waters, 1996).

Socialization of Caribbean Immigrants

For Caribbean immigrants, identity development is one of several parts of the acculturation process. Not only are they tasked with defining their identity, but they are also pressured to navigate their new context in ways that yield upward social and economic mobility (Waters, 2000; Wilson, 2009). This pressure has negative implications for their socialization in the United States. Morrison and Bryan (2014, as cited in Desmore et al., 2016) posit that Afro-Caribbean students deal with acculturative stress, which leads to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression, identity confusion, difficulty making friends, and behavioral family problems. Wilson (2009) describes the tension that exists for immigrants who physically cannot pass for White in a racialized context, such as the United States, but need a way to assimilate into American culture. A common method is to adapt linguistic patterns to reflect American dialect (Wiggan, 2009; Wilson, 2009). Despite these difficulties, research supports that Caribbean immigrants tend to fare better in professional, academic, and social contexts (Mclean, 2020). Commonly referred to as a "model minority," they focus on opportunities and on gaining both social and cultural capital, which is recognized and rewarded by their White counterparts (Mclean, 2020; Waters, 1996).

Research Question

Until recently, I never considered how my racial socialization in America as a Caribbean immigrant shaped me as an adult and educator in the present day. I am aware of the racial climate of the United States and the implications of racism in education and other contexts, which inspired my passion for urban education. However, I realized I have subconsciously suppressed the impact of my own experiences with race over the years. Despite this, recent experiences have awakened the need for unpacking the journey of my racial socialization. My identity as an Afro-Caribbean woman educator is both intersectional and multidimensional, therefore requiring analysis to understand 1) how I occupy space in various contexts and 2) why I choose to navigate them as such. This study examines the relationships among my racial/ethnic identities, socialization, and my navigation of urban education contexts. As such, the following question is answered through autoethnographic research methods:

How do my intersectional identities of being Caribbean, Black, and female impact my ability to navigate an urban Title I school?

Theoretical Framework

Variations of Transnational Identity (Wang, 2022) and Racial Identity Development (Cross, 1991) serve as the theoretical frameworks of this autoethnography. The interconnectedness of these two theories creates a multidimensional lens through which my experiences as a Caribbean-born immigrant can be understood.

Variations of Transnational Identity

The theoretical construction of transnational identity development derives from Wang's (2022) longitudinal study of Chinese student returnees from the United Kingdom (UK). This study developed three categories of transnational identities that can be extended to understand the experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrants. The first category consists of *homestayers* — those who remain engaged with familiar aspects of their culture, exhibit a strong affinity for Chinese culture, and have low identification with foreigners, as well as a reluctance to engage with or live transnationally in their new environment (Wang, 2022). The second consists of *wayfarers*– those who viewed Chinese culture with criticality and skepticism, opting instead to embark on self-exploration towards the culture of foreigners (Wang, 2022). Wayfarer identities are characterized by strong orientations towards their transnational placement, high engagement with foreigners (others), low emotional attachment to one's home country, and the adoption of foreign norms and values (Wang, 2022). The final category*, navigators,* comprises those who fluidly navigate between both contexts of their transnational identities. Navigators are characterized by "mixed emotional attachments, dynamic interactions of various habitual norms and values, and flexible transnational livelihood strategies" (Wang, 2002, p.548). Although Afro-Caribbean immigrants differ from the Chinese returnees in the study in terms of race and ethnic identity, this framework can still be applied to develop a more robust understanding of transnational identity development. Therefore, applying Wang's (2022) theory to Afro-Caribbean immigrant populations creates a spectrum along which various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups exhibit varying degrees of identity fluidity and cultural hybridization.

Cross Model of Nigrescence

The first Nigrescence model is situated within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, in which the racial and sociopolitical climate significantly shaped the lives of Black Americans (Cross, 1971). Initially, it was described as the "Afro-American model for self-actualization under conditions of oppression" (Cross, 1971, p. 25). For this reason, the initial Cross model is not entirely applicable to those with Afro-Caribbean identities. In 1991, Cross revised his Nigrescence model to account for the multidimensional nature of Blackness. Additionally, this model addresses the balancing and synthesis of Blackness within existing aspects of one's personhood, such as culture, sexual identity, and other role identities (Cross, 1991). The stages of the revised Nigrescence Model (Cross, 1991) are as follows:

1. **Pre-Encounter:** This stage covers a broad range of attitudes, spanning from low salience for race to the possession of social stigma and anti-Black attitudes. Two outcomes are possible

within this attitude: 1) The uplifting of racist, negative Black stereotypes, or 2) the possession of positive stereotypes of White people and White culture (Cross, 1991, pp. 190-191).

2. **Encounter:** This stage represents a single instance, or series of instances, that shifts a person's previously established Pre-encounter identity. The encounter stage represents a point in which the person is caught "off guard" by a powerful experience, whether positive or negative, that challenges previously constructed notions of Blackness and identity. The encounter stage comprises two steps: experience and personalization. Feelings during the encounter stage vary based on personalization and internalization of the experience; however, common emotions include confusion, alarm, depression, and anger (Cross, 1991, pp. 198-201).

3. **Immersion/Emersion:** In this stage, individuals immerse themselves in Black culture and adopt elements of it to form a new identity. While pride and interest sit at the core of the immersion experiences, the anxiety that the person's newfound Blackness may not be pure or acceptable is equally as pervasive. As a defense, intentional efforts to externally demonstrate one's Blackness are prevalent in this stage, materializing into symbolic representations, name-calling, and Blacker-than-thou attitudes. Conversely, Emersion represents an awakening and awareness of one's romanticization of Blackness in the Immersion stage and a movement towards a more concrete Black identity (Cross, 1991, pp. 201-209).

4. **Internalization:** In this stage, a new identity is developed, evidenced by natural ways of being and navigating life in Blackness. Key markers of internalization include: 1) confidence in one's standards of Blackness, 2) a transition from symbolic, boisterous rhetoric to more serious analysis and participation in the community, and 3) transition from an identity of pseudo-Blackness based on hatred for Whites to authentic Black pride and self-love. Furthermore, Internalization creates an opportunity for individuals to embrace a multicultural perspective, "in which case their concern for Blackness is shared with a multiplicity of cultural interests and saliences" (Cross, 1991, p. 213).

5. **Internalization-Commitment:** This stage represents a sustained translation of one's Blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment. It is often combined with the previous stage but is unique in its focus on continuing the process of internalizing the newfound Black identity (Cross, 1991, pp. 220-223).

Cross's (1991) revised Nigrescence model is more applicable to Black people outside the African American community. This model moves from Nigrescence as an identity change to a socializing experience. Additionally, Cross's (1991) use of Black as an all-encompassing category in the revised model is a stark contrast to the original, where the initial evolution was from "Negro" to "Black American." Adopting a new label represents a more inclusive lens through which the socialization of Afro-Caribbeans in the United States is better understood.

Methodology

Context

I conducted my study at a public, urban K-12 secondary school in the Southeastern United States, which I joined after the start of the new academic year. According to Milner's (2012) typology for understanding urban education contexts, this is considered an *urban emergent* school. Urban emergent schools and districts are located in large cities with fewer than

one million people, and face challenges such as resource scarcity, albeit on a much smaller scale than those in urban-intensive school districts (Milner, 2012). The school has a large student population, most of whom are students of color. Furthermore, a significant portion of this school's students are categorized as economically disadvantaged.

Research Method

According to Butz and Besio (2009), autoethnography is the practice of deliberately conducting identity work to understand or represent phenomena larger than oneself. Ellis et al. (2011) frame this research method as a blend of autobiographical and ethnographic work. Whereas autobiographies are written from retrospective, selective experiences not initially intended for inclusion in a published work, ethnographic research includes studying relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences to help insiders and outsiders understand the culture and phenomenon at hand (Ellis et al., 2011). The marriage of autobiographical writing and ethnography produces autoethnography, in which the researcher retrospectively writes about epiphanies (past experiences arising from participating in a culture or from possessing a cultural identity.

Butz and Besio's (2009) typology for autoethnographic practices frames this research method as multidimensional. Therefore, the lens the researcher adopts in their study depends on their desired outcome. For this study, I utilize autoethnography as a personal narrative. Because I place myself at the center of my research, I am subject to heavy critical analysis that informs my reflexivity (Butz & Besio, 2009). Additionally, the intense focus on my life experiences, both past and present, helps frame an understanding of broader social and cultural phenomena that involve and extend beyond me (Butz & Besio, 2009).

Data Collection

Over one week, I collected multiple types of data while navigating a large urban school. This included field notes, observations, journal entries, and archival memory data. I utilized triangulation to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and subsequently developed narratives that helped answer my research question (Carter et al., 2014). Method triangulation was employed during this research study through my use of multiple data collection methods to examine the same phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014; Hales, 2010). This ensured consistency in data collection and analysis processes while preventing any biases that might arise from a single method (Hales, 2010). Field notes contain substantial contextual information that frames the research study in terms of time, place, or population (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). I routinely collected field notes reflecting classroom and hallway observations. Several categories of observations are documented in my field notes, including my actions and reactions, interactions with staff and students, and student voices. I allocated forty-five minutes to each class period for observations and note-taking. Additionally, I routinely recorded my hallway observations while traveling between classes.

For ethnographic writers, research journaling is paramount not only for memory recall but also for fostering reflexivity. I collected video journal entries for the study to reflect on daily events and process lightbulb moments, difficulties, and raw emotions. I then adopted traditional journaling methods after the seven days, shifting my focus towards reflexivity during data

analysis. Additionally, autoethnographers frequently utilize memory as archival material to shape narratives and explain specific phenomena in their research. Personal memory is often elicited as a primary source of information for constructing narratives and is written down as textual data (Chang, 2016).

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as "a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (p.57). Using this analysis method, shared meanings and experiences in the data are illuminated and understood, and then filtered for relevance to answer the research question. Furthermore, the theoretical frameworks were critical, allowing me to determine how my observations, actions, and reflections reflected stages of identity development and my transnational adjustment. After manually coding journal entries and field notes, analysis led to the generation of five themes: 1) negative initial student perceptions, 2) countered student perceptions influenced by time, 3) conflicting feelings of discomfort and comfort, 4) juxtaposition between knowledge and action, and 5) insider-desire. Each theme will be accompanied by a narrative and discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Unpacking My Experiences: Thematic Analysis

Negative Initial Student Perceptions

The initial weeks in my new classroom, before the study, were slightly uncomfortable. I went through the motions of teaching, and although students were compliant and engaged when asked, the warm, seamless classroom environment I envisioned had not yet materialized. I recall some moments during downtime when I expected small talk to develop among us; however, that rarely happened. Instead, the classroom operated in a strict, transactional manner— I taught the content, students asked their questions, and then we retreated to our spaces until the end of the class period. This cycle continued into the week of the research study.

One day, I asked students to share their initial perceptions of me as their instructor during our icebreaker. Students provided a variety of responses; however, most were categorized as negative. Examples of student responses include: "I thought you'd be mean," "I thought you'd be structured and stern," and "I thought you were bougie and sassy." As I listened to the students, I realized that their perceptions of me were a part of the disconnect that I initially felt. In my field notes and journal, I noted feelings of timidity and awkwardness in how I carried myself and interacted with students. In retrospect, my feelings stemmed from the rejection I experienced when my students did not respond as I had hoped. This external struggle of disconnect and awkwardness between my students and me did not last long; however, it would soon give way to a different kind of struggle that would remain with me throughout the remainder of the study.

Countered Student Perceptions Influenced by Time

"I've started to feel more comfortable— not just with teaching, but with the students as well." This quote from my research journal reflects not only my growing comfort but also the external success that I was attaining. Field notes and observations reflected moments of

heightened student participation in the classroom. The silence that once followed direct instruction and work time was soon replaced by small talk and banter between students and me. Furthermore, one class let out a unanimous display of excitement when I told them I loved them. This, along with other small moments of connection, had a compound effect, ultimately leading to a change in student perceptions. When asked the second half of the question, "How have things changed or stayed the same after four weeks together?" all the students who began with negative initial perceptions countered it with something positive. Some responses included: *"I thought you were bougie and sassy until you smiled,"* and *"As time passed, you've grown on me a little."* I felt relieved when I heard the second portion of the students' responses; however, this was not a fully won victory. After getting these responses, more questions emerged. Yes, they now have a more positive perception of me as their teacher, but why did it have to follow an initial negative perception? What did I do to change how they viewed me? Was it something I did, or did they need time to warm up, as with any normal classroom? I may never know my students' perspectives, as I did not ask them to elaborate on their responses. However, seeing the duality of students' perceptions immediately triggered reflections on my socialization in the United States, which I will elaborate on later in this article.

Conflicting Feelings of Discomfort and Comfort

Acclimating to my new position took some time. Not only was I adjusting to a new set of professional responsibilities, but this was my first time working in an urban setting. As someone who has experienced prior transitions, I expected the change to be significant, but I did not account for my internal and external response to the change in work setting. My journal entries and field notes outlined several instances of expressed discomfort, from hallway transitions to classroom interactions and instruction. In all contexts in which I felt discomfort, I took the path of least resistance to avoid any looming confrontation I had imagined. As I navigated the hallways, I felt a sense of timidity as I walked between classes and was aware of how I shifted my body to move through the crowds of students. With each bell and class exit, I walked the hallway with a tense, stoic demeanor, as if to prove to students that I was not one of them.

Once I entered the classroom with my students, my tension died down, but not completely. In one journal entry, I recounted the day I switched seats in my class. I knew the seats needed to be rearranged, but I was nervous to switch them for fear of my students having an attitude or being unresponsive to change. I went through my first two blocks worried about how the students would react and whether the progress we had made would be undone by my decision to move seats. When I announced the seating chart, students did have adverse reactions; however, they complied, and we proceeded with our lesson. My discomfort was also noted in my field notes, where I described instances of disciplinary discourse between my students and me. John (pseudonym), one of my students, was known for habitually using his phone during class instruction. For the four weeks leading up to this research study, I saw him on his phone and said nothing. On this day, however, the phone use was excessive, and I knew something needed to be said. When I called him to my chair, I said, "John, you gotta ease up on the phone use, okay?" He laughed, nodded his head, and walked back to his seat. What seemed like a positive moment of discipline and redirection only created even greater discomfort. The way that I spoke to John is not the way that I usually speak. I recall reflecting in my journal that, if I were at either of my former schools, I would have said, "Okay, class, we are changing seats," and implemented the new arrangement without hesitation. If I were talking to a student who did not follow the rules, I

would have been direct and said, "John, get off your phone," or something along those lines. However, here in this context, I found that I shrank myself smaller due to my fear and discomfort.

Despite my looming discomfort, I continued to find my stride. Ironically, the moments of comfort came at the expense of discomfort, such as rearranging seating and disciplining students. In those moments, I felt more secure in my professional abilities as a teacher and was reminded that those skills are transferable across contexts. There were several moments when I reflected on instances in which I cracked jokes and showed my personality in class, and students responded positively to my quirks. I imagine that my growing comfort and display of personality helped contribute to students' altered perception of me. They soon became more comfortable, to the point of having conversations outside of the classroom and greeting me as we passed each other in the hallway.

Juxtaposition Between Knowledge, Thoughts, and Action

"I have the practical tools, just not the internal tools." This quote came from one of my reflection journals as I unpacked my navigation of the school context. I remember hearing a teacher scream at their students, and I immediately judged them for not using culturally responsive classroom management strategies. Just as soon as that crossed my mind, my reality humbled me. While that teacher may not have utilized the strategies, I was well-versed in, they may not have been experiencing the internal discomfort I was; therefore, I was not as equipped to pass judgment.

I began my journey towards becoming an urban educator in 2020. I hold a master's degree in urban education and am currently pursuing a terminal degree in the same concentration. It is a logical expectation that my pursuit of graduate studies in urban education would make me a strong fit for this new urban context and enable me to excel in it. However, I found a disconnect between my knowing, thinking, and doing during my research study. Based on what I had learned in my degree programs, I did what I knew to be right, but my thoughts were still problematic. For example, I am aware of the systemic issues that lead to the underfunding of urban schools; therefore, my classroom instruction reflected this. I recognize that it is the teacher's responsibility to intentionally implement cultural responsiveness at the core of their instruction; therefore, I structured my classroom accordingly. My knowledge and actions were married, yet my thoughts were sometimes judgmental and included merit-based sentiments. I thought I was an urban educator in the truest sense; however, after reflecting on my internal feelings, I realized there was a disconnect, as some of my thoughts were rooted in elitism. In my journal, I said, "This is not how I thought it would be," in a tone of disappointment and resignation. I spent years working hard to earn the title of urban educator, only to realize there was more work to be done. While it felt deflating at the time, I now realize that this work benefits me and any other students I may encounter in future urban contexts.

Insider-Desire

Despite conflicting feelings of discomfort and thoughts misaligned with my scholarly knowledge and teaching practices, I sought validation from my students, particularly in this urban context. I wanted my Blackness to be apparent and hoped it would break down the wall of

discomfort and disconnect between myself and my students. Ironically, while I wanted my Blackness to create commonality with my students, I still made a point to mention my Caribbean heritage to my students as a marker of uniqueness. One student did not believe me, which I found interesting and slightly offensive; however, I had to remember that due to my assimilation, there were no linguistic or external characteristics that would indicate that I am anything other than African American.

Other field notes documented instances in which students commented on my physical appearance and how I put myself together. Staff members with whom I had very little interaction initiated communication only to comment on my attire for the day. This made me feel accepted by students and staff, which also helped me become comfortable. Furthermore, I sought validation as a Black woman while navigating my role in this context. This arose from small interactions, yet for me, they were so meaningful. For example, I curated outfits with sneakers I had in common with my students to increase awareness of our shared identity. Another example of this comes from small talk between my students and me, in which they asked where I had gotten my braids done. Although the conversation lasted less than two minutes, for a moment I felt a sense of insider-ness. Given that hair is a central facet of Black womanhood, it was meaningful that I could connect with my Black female students on this matter, albeit briefly.

Reflecting on the Past

Analyzing the data revealed a myriad of conflicting feelings. I became increasingly aware of the problem, yet I was too uncomfortable to sit with and unpack those feelings. I realized that leaving those feelings to fester could lead to further internal conflict; therefore, I began a journey to understand myself more deeply. Through reflexive journaling, memory data, and conversations with my parents, I better understood my upbringing and how that shaped me into the woman and educator I am today. Furthermore, these conversations and moments of reflection illuminated the relationship between my racial/ethnic background and development, socialization in the United States, and my navigation of this research context.

"But I'm not Black."

I moved to the United States before starting the fourth grade. In hindsight, I realize it was the year that began my struggle in understanding my racial identity. Before moving, my parents gave no thought to how they would acclimate me to the racial climate of the United States. They knew of the potential impact of living in a racialized society; however, their Caribbean worldview and age allowed them to be more secure in their identities. I did not share in that luxury. My formative years were shaped by a juxtaposition of realities —one in which my skin color did not matter and the other in which it did. In St. Lucia, I was not forced to acknowledge my Blackness, yet in America, I had to do so at a very early age. While speaking with my father, he reminded me of an instance in which I refused to check the "Black" box on an identification form because I did not believe it accurately represented my identity. In what was a seemingly distressing experience for me, I eventually resigned and allowed them to select the appropriate box to complete the form. Although I had shed the St. Lucian dialect in favor of "twanging" and American speech patterns, I was ultimately a Black girl. I was not even granted the option to claim to be St. Lucian; even that felt like it was stripped from me and replaced with a simplistic label of being Black. From that point, though I was somewhat aware of my Blackness, I still did

not understand the racial implications that came with that identity. However, the remainder of my primary and secondary years showed me that these implications existed, and they were more painful than I anticipated.

Rejection and Its Effects

My socialization in the United States occurred in predominantly White contexts during my adolescence. My parents settled in rural and suburban towns where every school, church, and neighborhood had a very low population of Black people. I was further alienated as I was labeled as a gifted student and was frequently the only Black girl in my classes throughout middle and high school. While I excelled academically and in other extracurricular activities, socially, my Blackness became a source of otherness and rejection. Reflecting on moments of being rejected— from casting roles in the school play, to school or church camp dates— led me to realize that my negative experiences with my newfound understanding of race at an early age are what led to years of confusion, internalization, and suppression in my adulthood.

I noticed that most people who were successful and in positions of power were White; therefore, I internalized the notion that Blackness was inferior, and Whiteness was the standard. I constantly expended energy trying to assimilate and spent years navigating different friend groups and developing new interests, all in hopes of social acceptance. I was partially successful, yet I still felt a nagging sense of unbelonging. Not only did I feel rejected by my White peers, but I also felt rejected by my Black peers. Because most of my time was spent in White spaces, my interests, attire, and even dialect reflected those of my White counterparts. As a result, I was given the label "Oreo" or "Whitewashed" and struggled to develop and sustain relationships with peers of color through middle and most of high school. Those feelings of rejection from my Black peers, people who shared the same identity, led to the development of disregard and elitism. I determined that I would rather stick to the area where I was having some success than deal with rejection from the group I had internalized as inferior.

The Duality of Change and Stagnation

In 2016, I transferred to a university, thrilled to be only two years away from completing college. Due to my upbringing in White contexts, I decided to attend a predominantly White institution and was confident in my ability to seamlessly navigate my time there. While my confidence was not in vain because I did excel academically, attending this university served as an impetus for the evolution of my racial identity. At this predominantly White institution, I realized the need to further develop my Black identity. I believed that this new beginning — away from familiar faces and surroundings — was the appropriate time to do so. The socio-political climate of the time jump started this journey towards my reidentification, as the 2016 election and its surrounding events led to several moments of racial tension on our college campus, causing the Black student population to band together in solidarity. Seeing this happen and realizing I was part of that solidarity finally made me feel included in the Black community, despite the unfortunate events that sparked it.

Soon after, I became immersed in all things Black. My parents noticed a shift in how I carried myself and frequently commented on my newfound ethnocentrism. I added an Africana Studies minor to my degree plan to learn more about my history. I participated in Black Student Union meetings to stay connected with peers. After graduation, I accepted a teaching job and taught African American Studies every semester for four consecutive years. Furthermore, I

decided to advise the high school chapter of the Black Student Union on campus. From there, I decided to pursue graduate studies in urban education, hoping to impact students of color in my classes and school. While my efforts toward equity were meant to impact all students, I found that many of my pedagogical practices and advocacy were aimed at Black students. I constantly justified my slightly preferential treatment in the name of equity and cultural responsiveness and continued to do so throughout my time in public school education.

Despite my concerted efforts to display a preference for Blackness in my professional and personal lives, I still dealt with rejection into my adulthood. This time, however, much of the rejection came from Black peers in professional and social contexts. When it came from my White counterparts, it did not bother me as much as before. After all, the ethnocentric lens that I had developed did not allow me to care for their opinion and validation. Experiencing rejection from Black peers, however, led me to feelings of confusion that were reminiscent of my adolescence. I recall an example of this from my final year as a high school educator. I was conversing with a coworker who shared a conversation with one of our peers with me. In this conversation, my name was offered as a social connection, and she refused, saying that "I was not her kind of Black." Hearing this infuriated me simply because I felt like her statement was an inaccurate judgment. However, after further processing, I realized that I was so bothered by her statement because my Blackness was still being questioned. After all these years and the work, I did to both overcome my upholding of Whiteness and prove my commitment to Blackness, it still was not enough.

Collision of the Past and Present: Embracing Reflexivity

Reflexivity can be understood as a thoughtful, conscious self-awareness that shapes the research process into a subjective one (Finlay, 2002). Hertz (1997, as cited in Finlay, 2002) explains that "reflexivity involves an ongoing conversation about the experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (p.8). The use of reflexivity in this research study was multi-dimensional. Not only did it place me in the duality of being the researcher and researched, but it also provided a particular lens through which my actions, data collection process, and data analysis could be understood.

There were several moments during data collection where my researcher and subject identities intertwined. When I got dressed for school in the morning, I paid attention to how I put myself together, not only to look presentable but to elicit positive responses from staff and students. For example, I deduced that if I dressed casually and incorporated sneakers into my attire, I would look more like them, thus increasing the relatability between myself and my students. My subject identity was aware of my underlying desire to be accepted, yet, as a researcher, I was equally aware of external factors and their impact on research outcomes. Although I participated in this research study as the researcher and subject, I remained cognizant of my third role— a classroom teacher. I chose to navigate the school context authentically; however, as the teacher, I was aware that I held some control over classroom discourse and student interaction. As I asked my students questions, I knew I wanted an authentic response. Yet, I was careful in wording them to prevent potentially feeding into halo or Eeyore effects that I may hold as the researcher. For this reason, although I analyzed student responses through the lens of a researcher and a subject, I also considered that the natural progression of time from the beginning of the school year could have some bearing on students' perceptions of me.

To ensure my findings were well-rounded, I practiced reflexive journaling as I analyzed my data. As I looked through the student responses, reflexive journaling prompted me to ask

several questions: *Why did the students view me this way? What did I do to cause this perception? Was this any different from previous contexts?*

An excerpt of this process follows:

> In social circles, I have heard 'I didn't think I was going to like you at first, ' once we'd gotten past the initial stages of friendship and reflecting on our first couple of moments together. I've also heard the same thing from previous students (especially my black students). Why? I feel like I am a naturally guarded person. Growing up and having racialized experiences of rejection in the social contexts led me to become more guarded, and while I do love the art of teaching, I usually enter the beginning of every semester/year with a wall up. It's strange, though, because even though I have a wall up, I want the students to receive me well and like me initially, and that usually never happens. I think the wall was even thicker coming into this context seeing that it was a different environment than I was used to. I thought that I had to come in and be extra closed off to prevent any issues of disrespect or discipline, and to show the students that I wasn't "to be messed with.

While analyzing my field notes and journal entries, I wondered why I was having such a hard time internally when 1) student perceptions and interactions changed to become positive with time, and 2) I was still displaying high effectiveness as an instructor during the research study. This duality led to another moment of reflexive journaling– an excerpt follows:

> Why do I feel uncomfortable? Because it's a new space that I've never encountered. All my life, I have been placed in predominantly White spaces. Though I pursued urban education graduate studies, I'd never been in an urban school as a traditional school educator. Also, since being in the states and finding myself around other Black people, I questioned my blackness and wondered if I was showing up as Black enough in spaces. So, my discomfort isn't so much that students made me feel unsafe, or that the environment was uncomfortable, but more so that the lack of confidence in my Blackness made me feel very uncomfortable and a bit vulnerable in those spaces. When I was working in suburban contexts, I was Black enough because many of my students were White. They don't question or feel out my Blackness. When I had classes with majority Black students, however, I began to have similar feelings, because I constantly wondered if I was showing up as Black enough for them.

Reflexivity was central to my research; therefore, it manifested in several ways throughout my preparation, collection, and analysis. However, it was during the analysis portion that my "lightbulb" came on, and I realized that my research greatly benefited from this practice, and that certain findings would not have been revealed without it.

Discussion

Internal Struggle, External Success

My findings could have been summarized through a thematic analysis of the data collection alone. However, when coupled with reflexivity and a dual lens of both the researcher and the subject, I was able to learn much more about myself in the research context. The findings from this study represent my duality of internal struggle and external success, further cementing my position as both an insider and outsider. If someone were to shadow me during the study, they would not be able to see the timidity I mentioned in my research journals or the awkwardness I felt. Instead, they would see an effective teacher leading her classroom through activities and instructional periods. While I had pervasive thoughts, feelings of seeking validation, and questioned my presence in this urban setting, the mask of pseudo-confidence that I adorned daily prevented me from looking as vulnerable as I felt. On the outside, I was an educated Black woman with knowledge of pedagogical practices necessary for yielding student success. Yet, on the inside, I was reminiscent of a twelve-year-old me, who struggled to find her identity as an immigrant Black girl in the United States. This led me to realize that much of what I had accomplished in hopes of connecting with my Blackness did not facilitate any healing for me; rather, it was a band-aid that temporarily deferred the negative experiences that I had in the past. I used my educational and professional accomplishments as a source of overcompensation to prove my level of commitment to "being Black." Yet, I realized that I still have not come to understand the meaning of Blackness for my personal development.

Cross's (1991) revised theory of Nigrescence offers greater opportunities for Black people beyond African Americans to understand their racial identity development. Before this study, my understanding of this theory led me to believe that I had achieved internalization-commitment, the fifth and final stage of development (Cross, 1991). However, this study has revealed that this is not the case. Considering my socialization leading up to the research study and the findings, the Immersion/Emersion stage is where I have stagnated for a while. Black rage and anti-Whiteness may not be as prevalent; however, I have developed a Pseudo Black identity that has been shaped out of rejection and the desire for validation. It is not until I discover true Blackness in my context and identity that I will attain Internalization-Commitment. Furthermore, given the nonlinear nature of the Nigrescence model, although I may one day be in that stage, an experience may return me to the pre-encounter or immersion/emersion stage (Cross, 1971). In this event, additional reflection and processing would be necessary to understand how and why I am situated within that stage.

Insider vs Outsider

As a Caribbean immigrant, I never subscribed to the notion of racial identity. Instead, I prided myself on being a St. Lucian. When I moved, that pride was shadowed by the prospect of proximity to Whiteness and assimilation to American culture. According to Wang (2022), I was a wayfarer. I placed my heritage in a box— my linguistic patterns, my cultural preferences, even the memories of the island were stored away. Instead, I gravitated toward Whiteness; not the idea of being American, but Whiteness itself. Upon realizing that this gravitation was not feasible and instead had negative ramifications for my identity development and socialization, I then detoured and committed to my journey towards Blackness. This journey was not towards understanding my identity as a Black St. Lucian woman; instead, it became an attempt to assimilate into African American culture. While I have experienced moments of success, this research has led me to realize that I am firmly entrenched in the insider/outsider dichotomy. To my students, I am a Black woman to whom they can relate on many levels due to our shared racial identity, yet from a cultural and ethnic perspective, I will always remain an outsider. I

spent years running away from the culture that brought me here to this country in hopes of fitting in and being accepted, yet that escapism led to feelings of insecurity and negative experiences with socialization.

Now, I wonder what my life would look like if I had navigated spaces as a St. Lucian immigrant, not someone who was trying to assimilate into Whiteness and American culture hurriedly. I assume that this research would look much different. Instead of using my St. Lucian identity solely to separate myself from the African American community, I could have offered diverse perspectives in various spaces throughout my life, and in classrooms such as this one. However, prioritizing hurried assimilation over cultural sustenance has led me to this point in my life—an adult who lacks a true sense of identity.

Conclusion

Elements of my experience can be impactful in affecting change within various sectors of the educational landscape, whether in K-12 or higher education contexts. For years, teacher-exchange organizations have recruited Afro-Caribbean educators to the United States. While many teacher placements are in rural and suburban contexts, many also end up in urban districts (Participate Learning, 2023). Thus, providing opportunities for Afro-Caribbean teachers to examine their racial and ethnic identities and the roles they may play in their teaching practices in US classrooms is critical to preventing the perpetuation of inequitable student outcomes. Additionally, studies by Bailey (2016) and Campbell (2017) that focus on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean students highlight the need for universities to create spaces that promote inclusivity and increase the visibility of their racial and ethnic identities. Ultimately, sustained efforts to honor and support Afro-Caribbean identities in educational spaces are vital to their ability to navigate U.S. contexts confidently as teachers, students, and, most importantly, humans.

There are diverse perspectives on how to navigate the doctoral journey. When I first decided to pursue this degree, my mentor said to me, "This is not just about a degree; this is personal work." I did not understand what she meant by this until I completed this research study. I realized that the spirit of overcompensation that had driven my previous professional and educational endeavors needed to be replaced with a humble posture that seeks to heal myself and others through my research. This autoethnographic work is not summative; rather, it serves as a launching point in continuing this journey towards self-discovery. Since I was an adolescent, I navigated spaces with a pseudo-identity, which has had negative ramifications for my socialization in the United States. Completing this research reveals the need to return to the roots of my identity. As an adult who is far removed from the eight-year-old girl who first immigrated to the United States, I cannot retrace my actions and erase the negative experiences of the past. What I can do, however, is learn from those experiences and forge a path towards an identity that is an authentic reflection of who I am, thus shaping how I navigate all aspects of my future life.

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