

BECOMING VISIBLE: CARIBBEAN STUDENTS NAVIGATING LIFE AT U.S. UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *In this qualitative research project, I explore the lived experiences of five Caribbean students studying at a rural university on the East Coast of the United States. I investigate the social and academic experiences of these young adult Caribbean students and focus on their perspectives and coping strategies as they negotiate the norms and expectations of the United States. Framed by my use of testimonio as method – a composite lens shaped through my use of bricolage and my understanding of transculturalism – I examine how all these factors influence their sociocultural and academic experiences and the ways in which they perceive and perform the Self. In doing so, I highlight key aspects of the experiences of Caribbean nationals and add to the conversation surrounding the adaptation of international students at U.S. universities.*

Keywords: *transcultural, Caribbean, international students, bricolage, testimonio*

INTRODUCTION

The United States hosts about 21% of all the international students across the globe, more than any other country (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). Unlike immigrants, who intend to establish permanent residency, these sojourners (Martin & Harrell, 1996) are granted visas to complete academic or vocational programmes with the understanding that their stay in the United States is temporary. They are often actively recruited by numerous academic and non-academic programmes because they are a source of both financial benefits and intellectual capital for the university, and because they add a much sought-after layer of diversity to the campus environment (World Education Services [WES], 2012; Zhao et al., 2005).

The number of international students in the United States has been growing, and during the 2016/2017 school year, there were 1,078,822 enrolled in university classes or Optional Practical Training (OPT) (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2017a). Existing research on international students is limited and explores mostly psychosocial

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or psychocultural adjustment (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008; Morgan & O'Garro, 2008). With 77% of all students who enter the United States on F and M visas coming from Asian countries (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [U.S.I.C.E], 2018), much of the existing research centres on nationals from this geographic region (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Heggins & Jackson, 2003). Only 1.05% of international students come from Caribbean countries, primarily from Jamaica, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti (IIE, 2017b), with little or no disaggregated data on their distribution across the United States.

Current research on Caribbean people in the United States centres on first and second generation immigrants with a focus on the assimilation of individuals and families into U.S. social, cultural, and political norms (Benson, 2006; Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Ostine, 1998; Waters, 1991). A few newer studies, like that of Griffin et al. (2016), investigate the university experience through the eyes of both native black students – descendants of the enslaved Africans in the United States – and immigrant black students. Despite the limited research specifically referring to students from the Caribbean, much of the data collected on the experiences of Caribbean immigrants can be related to those of international students. Not only do these two groups share a common background, but they also have mirrored experiences in social adaptation as they navigate challenges such as racialized ascriptions, marginalization, and erasure upon entry into the United States (Conrad & Brown, 2007; Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Guy, 2001). For Caribbean students, the uniqueness or even the existence of their academic and psychosocial needs is frequently ignored or unrecognized (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014), essentially rendering their experiences invisible and presenting them with numerous choices, both conscious and unconscious, which influence both their academic and sociocultural experiences and outcomes.

With this research, I intend to deepen the discussion among educators and administrators at institutions of higher education in the United States, as they strive to provide positive experiences for their international student population. Particularly for young adults, the academic and social worlds are intertwined and a positive or negative impact on one will often transfer to the other (Brook & Willoughby, 2015). My own experiences as an international student from the Caribbean drew me to this research and though the challenges and sociocultural norms have changed over time, the core of the experience remains. My journey to (re)claim and (re)state my ways of knowing and understanding the world has led me to seek a deeper understanding of the process of cultural adaptation and its effects on the living and learning experiences of individuals and of their communities. Through these participants' experiences, I highlight the perceptions and intersections of an often-overlooked population in an effort to encourage

recognition and additional support from faculty, staff, and the general university population.

The Student Experience

Late adolescence/early adulthood is a time when students form their personal and social identities, exploring and experimenting with different social roles; it is a “process of personal exploration leading to the formation and linking of one’s attitudes, values, and beliefs to social belongingness” (Conrad & Brown, 2007, p. 3). As international students leave the countries they call home, they face the same struggles of any young adult leaving home for an extended period for the first time: homesickness, depression, loneliness/isolation, confusion over identity and values, discrimination and prejudice, uncertainty and anxiety, somatic complaints, cognitive distress, and depression (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). However, the impact on international students is more gradual and long-term than simple culture shock. Young adult international students regularly face conflicts/challenges around language, culinary preferences, perceptions of time, gender/sexual roles and concepts, finances, cognitive and pragmatic expectations, cultural isolation, and even general identity, all of which can make students face immense and immediate pressure to assimilate to new behaviour and systems of communication (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Johnson & Sandhu, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007). In addition, the challenges to a student’s cultural and ethnic identity generated by the normalized U.S. racial narrative can increase stress levels and self-doubt, and feelings of namelessness and obscurity.

Much current research focuses on feelings of alienation and difficulties adjusting to a new culture (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Morgan & O’Garro, 2008). Only a few, like Beoku-Betts (2004) and Eland and Thomas (2013), place significant emphasis on the intersections with academic experience or actually investigate feelings of marginalization influenced or perpetuated by institutions and individuals. Lee and Rice (2007) found that students eventually developed a level of intercultural competence in their negotiation of both host and home culture. The main challenge of this adaptation is that students are often expected to bridge this gap on their own with minimal support from the institution at which they are enrolled. Although Caribbean students, as a segment of the student population, are largely underestimated and/or ignored by leaders of institutions of higher education (Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014), this research aims to add to the conversation around their specific sociocultural and academic needs and to enhance the visibility of this segment of the student population.

THEORY AND METHODS

Bricolage

For this study, I embraced bricolage, which acknowledges the complexity of the lived world and the limitations of using an isolated method or approach (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe et al., 2012). Bricolage refers to a process or framework that draws on multiple ideas and concepts to create a theoretical or conceptual window into a phenomenon, question, or ways of being and knowing. With this framework (*Figure 1*), I incorporated indigenous and endarkened methodologies (Bishop, 2005; Chilisa, 2012; Dillard, 2000; Grande, 2008; Settee, 2011; Smith, 2012), critical autoethnography (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016), transcultural theory (Huffman, 2010), and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Solorzano and Yosso, 2009) into a composite lens through which I could make sense of the research phenomenon. Bricolage encourages me to “ask informed questions, develop complex concepts, construct alternate modes of reasoning, and provide unprecedented interpretations of the data [I] generate” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 13), while considering the way power shapes both my knowledge and its acquisition.

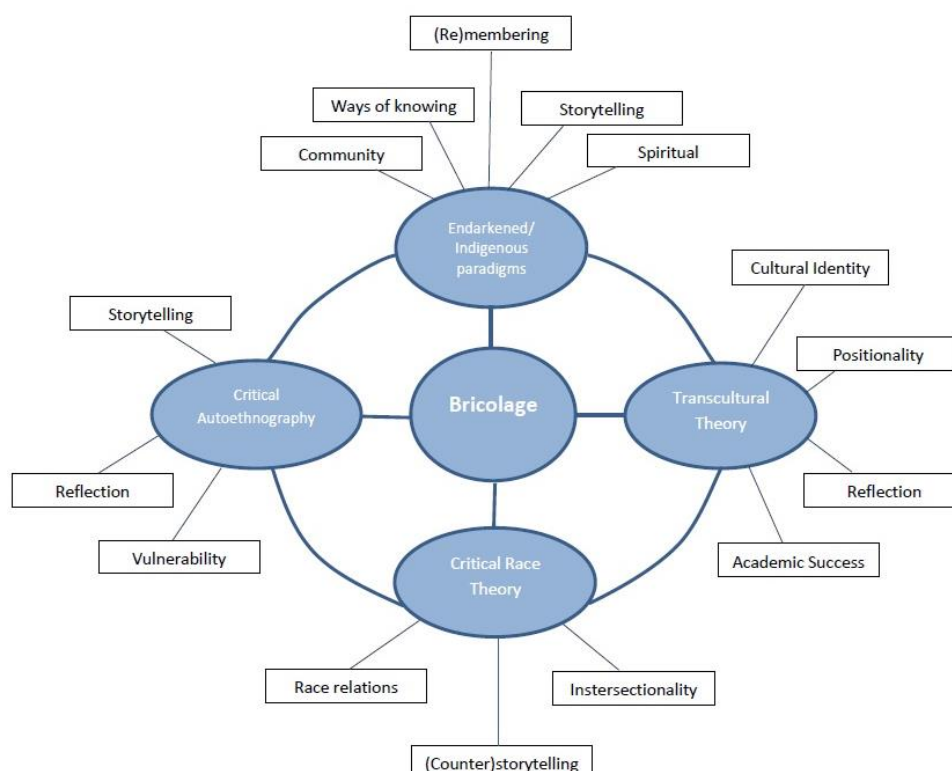


Figure 1
The bricolage

Testimonio

I used *testimonio* as method (Pérez-Huber, 2009) not only to deepen my connection with my participants, but also to encourage sharing and unearthing of knowledge that is “underrepresented or invisible within conventional academic discourses” (Haig-Brown, 2003, p. 416). When used in combination with the bricolage in my theoretical framework, *testimonio* troubles the traditional framing of research and creates space for (re)membering (Dillard, 2012; Smith, 2012), as well as naming, reframing, and representing (Smith, 2012) participants’ lived experiences. As a form of oral tradition and personal expression, *testimonio* connects with the storytelling traditions of endarkened/indigenous paradigms and the counter-storytelling inherent in CRT “to open space for a form of truth telling while, at the same time, allowing people to keep their secrets” (Haig-Brown, 2003, p. 416).

Rather than engaging in a more traditional interviewing style that is shaped by a formal, often-recorded question and answer session, *testimonio* creates space for me to reject the notion of researcher as impartial outsider and instead reciprocate their vulnerability by sharing some of myself as well. My data collection process placed emphasis on informal, non-hierarchical conversations around relevant life experiences, often taking dendritic forms. Nevertheless, it highlighted the nuances and intersections of U.S. life and maintained “the unique characteristic of being a political and conscientized reflection” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012, p. 525).

Context

I conducted this qualitative study on a university campus in the town of Hillridge¹, a rural centre for diversity on the East Coast of the United States. According to the university website, there are over 30,000 enrolled students, more than 25,000 of whom are undergraduates. In contrast with the regional population in which 93% of residents identify as white, 65% of college students in Hillridge identify as white, 4% as black, 5% as Hispanic, and 8% as Asian. Foreign nationals make up 11% of the university population. Of that number, less than 1% are Caribbean nationals. There were only 10 Caribbean nationals enrolled during the 2014-2015 school year² prior to starting this study, all of whom were undergraduate students.

¹ Names of places and participants have been changed.

² This information was provided via email on February 10, 2015 by the Interim Director of the international center.

Participants

Four of the study participants were Caribbean nationals on F-1 visas and the fifth, born in the United States to Caribbean parents, had lived in the Caribbean from the age of three. Through initial contacts in the university's Intensive English Program and the Caribbean Student Association, comprising primarily U.S.-born children of Caribbean nationals, I identified participants using the snowball sampling method (Taylor et al., 2015). All study participants were undergraduates aged 18 to 25, ranging from 1st through 4th year on the campus

Table 1
Introducing the participants

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

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I generated data through weekly meetings with my participants over the course of one semester. I audio-recorded and transcribed the first and final meetings, with the remaining meetings structured as informal conversations. Aligning my data collection with my use of testimonio, the final meeting was held as a talking circle with all participants present (Jennings et al., 2015; Wilbur et al., 2001). I took field notes during all meetings and added details to my notes once the conversation was over. During these meetings, I developed a better understanding of how my participants position themselves in relation to their host and home communities.

In order to establish familiarity with my participants while thoroughly engaging in meaningful, non-hierarchical dialogue (Freire, 1970), I chose not to record the informal weekly meetings. During these meetings, the participants and I engaged in general conversation during which we discussed their social life, their college classes, and their

³ A Caribbean country although it is geographically part of Central America (Smith, 2005).

families. Analysis and data generation occurred simultaneously and iteratively during data collection (Mayan, 2009). After data collection was completed, I performed a cross-case analysis of interviews and field notes followed by coding, categorizing, and allowing themes to emerge from the data.

Embracing Bishop's (2005) third position, which emphasizes collaborative storying and re-storying and creates space to co-construct mutual understandings, coding took place progressively throughout data collection and analysis. As a member of the community, in collaboration with the participants, I used my cultural knowledge to interpret and (re)present participant experiences and voices. During coding and analytic journaling, I intentionally queried how participants characterized and made meaning of their experiences, how I in turn made meaning of those experiences, and, notably, in what ways my emotions and interpretations may have mediated or distorted participants' intended meanings (Dillard & Okpalaoka, 2011).

In recognition of the ontological complexity of the bricolage, I used crystallization (Ellingson, 2009) as the method of analysis for all data sets, rather than the more traditional analytic method of triangulation (Kincheloe, 2005; Kincheloe et al., 2012). Crystallization, which challenges both objectivity and traditional validity by refuting the claim of one Truth, combines multiple forms of analysis and genres of representation and allows the data to validate itself through reflection and refraction through engagement with the various and numerous facets of the *crystal* lens. This process of analysis "provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic . . . we know there is always more to know" (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). Through interpretive bricolage (Kincheloe, 2005), crystallization facilitates the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to continually seek emerging themes and categories from the data. With the crystal, I incorporated a cycle of questioning, self-reflexivity and writing as inquiry (Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Tilley-Lubbs, [in press]; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and allowed myself to be vulnerable while problematizing the phenomena both privately and in the presence of my participants. The use of testimonio in combination with the crystal added another facet to my analysis and established a high level of reflexive validity (Ellingson, 2009; Lather, 1993) by creating space for me to engage with my participants in discussion of my findings and interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION: NAVIGATING CAMPUS LIFE

The overarching objective of this research is to explore and understand the ways in which young adult Caribbean students experience and navigate sociocultural and academic norms and expectations while attending university in the United States. Specifically:

- How do young adult Caribbean students perceive, experience, and negotiate sociocultural norms and expectations in the United States?
- How, if at all, do these perceptions, experiences, and negotiations influence students' academic engagement and experiences?

Three themes representing aspects of the student experience emerged from the data. Participants talked about their cultural experiences related to personal identifiers, the framing of race and racialized experiences at home and in the United States, and the ways in which they navigate academic life as Caribbean nationals. I do not claim that these themes are all-inclusive and all-encompassing. But, rather, I assert that these named challenges reflect experiences that transcend nationality and offer fresh perspectives into the contemporary experiences of international students, particularly those coming from Caribbean nations. Through the description that follows, all quotations, including those comprising words or short phrases, come directly from interview notes and transcripts.

Culture: Framing the Self

Recognizing the significance of being able to name one's reality (Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2011), I asked all participants in this study about their self-identification and how they rank various aspects of their identities, including race/ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, and country of origin. I encouraged participants to include additional categories as needed (see Table 2). For all participants, nationality was a primary source of grounding and central to their understanding and performance of the Self. Four of the five participants indicated that it was their primary identification and for the fifth participant, it was secondary. Defining themselves primarily by country of origin invoked a sense of national pride but was multi-edged. It identified unifying factors, and created desired distance from African-American and other minoritized ascriptions. It also had the potential to exacerbate feelings of isolation from the home community.

Table 2

Participant self-identification

Participants	Primary Identification	Secondary Identification	Tertiary Identification
Julio	Trinidadian	Male	Mixed race
Jared	Haitian	Caribbean	Black
Kent	Barbadian	Male	Christian
Sita	Mestizo	Belizean	Catholic
Noro	Jamaican	Athletic	Christian

Participants also noted several relatively minor changes to their daily behaviour and thought processes around dietary choices, clothing choices, and daily routines. As expected, all participants identified changes in eating habits, due to high shipping costs and limited resources, space, or meal preparation skills as having a significant impact on their framing of the Self. On their regular return trips to the Caribbean – at least twice per year for each – food was one of the first things they sought out for nostalgia and a “concrete” representation of Self. It is important to recognize, though, that this opportunity to return is not financially feasible for all students, which can, in minoritized contexts, increase anxiety and stress levels, lead to stratification within the cultural group, and inflate feelings of isolation from the home culture. All participants mentioned at least one instance of trying to figure out how to (re)present their sense of self and style with winter clothing while negotiating their transcultural selves. And further, as is standard for many undergraduate students, they each had to develop new routines that excluded the people, things, and places with which they had spent the majority of their lives and which helped centre their sense of Self.

For all five participants, their culture was inextricably connected to their countries of origin and their family histories. Their understanding of their culture and the role it played in their daily interactions determined not only their friendships, but also if and how they chose to showcase aspects of their culture while in Hillridge. Overall, the data revealed that, culturally, participants connected most deeply with the experience of making and maintaining friendships, the unconscious choices involving the maintenance of accent, and the conscious choice to resist certain adaptations.

Making and maintaining friendships. The dispersal of Caribbean students across the United States results in the forming of new connections and, oftentimes, a loss of the old and familiar. Social media has helped tremendously in maintaining connections across borders and time zones. But the challenge of maintaining old connections while building new ones is widespread. Noro and Sita both added, during separate conversations, that their friendship base at home was highly dependent on the children of their parents’ friends. But they added that because of historical ties across ethnic groups, bonded by class status, sociocultural stratification was not clearly visible within those circles.

As relatively new arrivals to the United States, though, those historical connections and related networking opportunities, which framed much of participants’ socializing and socialization in their home countries, were not always available. Julio and Kent both felt that the lack of these historical connections in the United States made it even harder to make genuine friends here. Julio shared his frustrations about the realization that the networking circles his family had so carefully developed were no longer significant. Friendships in the United States seemed more transactional and both asserted that their U.S. peers:

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

Notably, although all participants missed the ease of community socializing with which they were raised, they still sought entry into those otherwise inaccessible spaces as a way to gauge social success.

For all participants, social connections on campus were established primarily through their living accommodations or academic courses. Sita, Julio, and Noro lived in living-learning communities with other engineers and were primarily surrounded by classmates. Jared and Julio were athletic, and both had made numerous connections playing pick-up soccer at various locations on campus. Participants also noted that church played a major role in socializing as Sita, Julio, and Jared attended services regularly, though not at the same location. The data highlighted the positive role of living-learning communities (themed housing) and social/sporting organizations in the lives of Caribbean nationals. Partially due to the recognition of their small numbers on campus, these housing and social structures were a key part of their positive adaptation to the campus setting. They all noted that they would feel a sense of isolation if those contexts were not available. These pocket communities provided space to establish social connections. They also presented their own challenges by heavily isolating aspects of the students' identity while rarely offering opportunities to build the types of social capital needed to circumvent U.S. sociocultural norms.

Only Kent, interestingly the sole U.S.-born participant, actively fought to maintain a close circle of Caribbean friends in the United States. During that time, he relied on the tradition of using word of mouth to build friendships:

You know Caribbean people. There's always a friend of a friend of a friend or a distant cousin. Because in my mind, if you're friends with someone I know and trust [. . .] and you've been friends with this person for a long time, I know these people. If you do some stupid stuff, they probably will not be friends with you. (*Kent, Initial Interview*)

For all participants, their closest circle of friends still comprised school friends from "back home". Enmeshed in the *myth of return* (Oikonomidoy, 2009), which still shapes my personal narrative after more than 20 years in the United States, all participants framed their cultural retention through their intent to return home. They also noted that social media and smart phone applications with free phone and video calling were extremely important for maintaining older connections, and even establishing new global ones. The

use of technology to communicate with distant friends mitigated any sense of cultural isolation and made the need for an on-campus home community less significant.

Additionally, all participants affirmed that “traditional” Caribbean greetings sometimes highlighted cultural incongruence with their U.S. peers. It is quite common in many islands to say “Good morning”, “Good afternoon”, or “Good evening” when encountering another person, either at home or in public. Although that tradition exists in some U.S. communities, participants noted that they often received questions, comments, or strange looks when offering what they considered a “common courtesy”. Referring to his pre-college roommates during our talking circle, Kent said:

I’d usually be the first one down or the second one down. I’d be like “good morning, what’s up? How’s your day going so far”? At least a couple times out of the week they would ask me “Why do you say good morning? Why are you saying this”?

Most experienced either silence or quizzical looks in response to their greetings and, like Kent, they considered it “not so much focused on being sociable, but more so being respectful of your elders, and kind of also being respectful generally, because that’s the thing to do”.

This incongruence of social norms often led to awkwardness in the initial stages of friendship and participants discussed their struggles with different concepts of personal space, acceptable home visits, etc. During our final talking circle, all participants discussed how simple differences in community norms and expectations like these have introduced feelings of isolation – however fleeting – and, highlighting the importance of counter-spaces (McClain & Perry, 2017) that they look forward to meeting people from congruent cultural backgrounds.

Accent. Participants also emphasized changes to the way they speak and the ways in which they strive to maintain their “Caribbean-ness”. During each recorded discussion, the concept of accent emerged organically and early. Noro had only been in the United States for a few months and had the strongest Caribbean accent. Also eighteen years old, Sita had been in Hillridge for two years and had no discernible Caribbean accent. For many, like Sita, keeping or losing one’s accent happens before they are aware of what is taking place (Popova, 2016). Changes in accent often result in challenges to one’s identity on the return home, and Sita and Jared managed the change by developing a type of code switching that was helpful, but not without its problems.

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

English I sound more like I'm speaking with a Belizean accent over an American accent. (*Sita, Talking Circle*)

Kent noted that because he had spent the first three years of his life in the United States, he never fully developed a typical Barbadian accent. However, although he believed he had lost most of it, he still had a very distinct lilt to his voice.

Since I've been here, I've lost my accent and it comes back very slowly when I am home. But because of how quickly we talk there, when I have an accent and I'm in the States, no one will understand a word I say. Having to slow down so often, I've eventually lost it. Going back home, people make comments about the fact that I'm no longer local [. . .] I know they're just making jokes about it, but I'm like 'that's not what it is'. (*Kent, Talking Circle*)

Noro also commented on having to slow his speech, adding that because he always had to repeat himself, he sometimes gave up on conversations or adding details because it was "too much work". All participants determined that their frequent trips home helped them maintain some aspects of their accent – a critical part of their identity as Caribbean students. They used language and accent as a way to maintain the performance of their Caribbean identity while simultaneously emphasizing the Other. In general, in recognizing the power differential shaped by both historical and contemporary perceptions, they wanted to create distance between themselves and either African-Americans or Middle Easterners as they were wary of the negative connotations associated with each group. Interestingly, the language and conceptualization of us vs. them was woven throughout all my interviews. They all wanted to fit in and make friends while at the same time limiting cultural compromises.

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

Race: Framing and Being Framed

Race emerged as the second major theme in this exploration. When international students enter the United States to pursue their studies, they are automatically identified through perspectives informed by racialized social norms. As “human fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance” (Haney López, 2009, p. 239), the particular shade of one’s skin or the width of one’s nose can determine one’s placement in U.S. society. Interestingly, in this study, students who are mixed were clear to point that out, distancing themselves from too much blackness and the anticipated discrimination. On the other hand, those who could be visually identified as black did not mention their race in discussion without prodding.

Making sense of race. For all five participants, race had not become a consideration in their identification until after they moved to the United States to study. All participants, to varying degrees, agreed that they had limited or no experience with issues of race and racism back home and felt frustrated with the emphasis on race in U.S. society. They all stressed that racial ancestry had limited influence on how they perceived themselves in their home countries; class – and in Haiti, linguistics – had much greater influence. While residing in the United States, however, race played an important part in how they were perceived and treated by others. During our initial interview, Julio emphasized the role of other social frameworks in Trinidad, noting that in his experience, being wealthy, or at least being part of what is considered trendy or culturally relevant, was far more important than race. When asked if their own class status affected their perceptions of the impact of race, all who identified as upper middle class reemphasized race’s limited influence at home, echoing Julio’s resounding “Nah man, is only money and family that does matter nowadays”. Should this study be replicated, it would be meaningful to include more students from poor and working-class families, who may lend a different perspective to this conversation. In the Caribbean context, it is important to consider the role that colour and colonized norms play in who has money and which families are the “good ones”.

Although participants definitely encountered instances of micro-aggressive behaviour (Ee, 2013; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015), no one expressed major dissonance based on these experiences. During the final talking circle, everyone reiterated Sita’s assertion that experiencing the racial classification in the United States had made them more aware of racial differences than before.

Julio alone expressed acerbity with skin colour-related discrimination. He felt that he had been treated differently, particularly when trying to gain access to fraternity parties, because people questioned whether or not he belonged in these white spaces. He noticed that women at the parties often gave him “strange looks” and were more reluctant to

interact with him. In approaching “traditional white girls”, he more than once heard questions like “What’s this Indian fella doing”? which resulted in making him feel less attractive, in stark contrast to his popularity back home. Julio’s fixation on race during interviews clearly indicated that racialized experiences dominated his thoughts about his university journey and his goals around shaping his personal and professional circles.

Regardless of the ways in which students defined their own racial identity, racialized expectations and ascriptions in the United States had significant influence on the ways in which they understood their educational and sociocultural experiences. Participants indicated that their expectation of encountering racism while studying in the United States were high and all commented on the conflict in relating their own racial positioning to the identities imposed upon them by U.S. social norms and the ways in which they navigated those ascriptions. Participants noted pressure to define themselves racially based on standards relevant in the United States, even when they were unsure of meaning or influence of said standards:

People come up to me and by looking at me, without even talking, they’re like, ‘What race are you?’ because I’m not black, I’m not really white⁴. So I’m kind of smack dab in the middle. I’m not used to such rigid stuff. (*Noro, Meeting 3, Field Notes*)

Since I moved here, most people identify me as black: like my friends who are Caucasian identify me as black but then I have some friends who are black and they always tell me that ‘you’re not black’. (*Sita, Initial Interview*)

Along with Sita and Noro, Julio also discussed the contrast between this and the fluidity of the concept of race at home. All three felt that racial identification in their home countries was more flexible and contextual, based on the time, place, and who you were with. At home, multi-group identification was the norm amongst their peers. The inflexibility of the U.S racial binary was discussed at length, with Noro and Julio pointing out that having to choose one aspect of their racial heritage with which to identify meant disregarding and disrespecting other ancestors. They welcomed the fluidity that created space for them to move comfortably between contexts.

Navigating stereotypes. Julio, uniquely, intentionally harnessed the “exotic” stereotype often ascribed to Caribbean nationals, particularly because of his racial ambiguity within U.S. culture. He stated that, because of the media, most people he encountered in the United States saw the Caribbean as a place filled with sun, beaches, and fun. In his experience, if he announced his country or even region of origin early in an interaction,

⁴ Noro used black and white here to refer to skin color, not race.

people seemed much more eager to chat because they instantly perceived him as being very Caribbean – “chill and laid back”. He began to use that as a conversation starter during his second year at Hillside and openly advocated this approach to the other participants during the final talking circle.

Not all participants had discovered this tactic or were racially ambiguous or regionally identifiable enough to benefit from its effects. Others were cornered by common stereotypes they found hard to escape. Noro in particular, had been frequently questioned about his ability to bring marijuana into the country. Two of the others had encountered at least one polite inquiry. But Noro’s home country of Jamaica, in spite of his clean cut and preppy appearance, seemed to draw the most queries. Additionally, the stereotype that island people live in huts seemed quite common and all participants had similar experiences with its use. Kent remembered being asked “Do you guys wear shoes”? and “Do you guys live in huts”? on more than one occasion. This not only highlights the limited understanding of global cultures and varying life experiences by professors, staff, and students alike but also underlines the emotional wear and tear of these often micro-aggressive interactions. Julio noted that his white and white-presenting friends from Trinidad and Tobago rarely experienced the same cultural ascriptions because of their (perceived) racial attributes.

Interactions with Academics

As all participants came to the United States to pursue higher education, academic success was a constant theme through all our conversations. They stressed that studying abroad was central to achieving their long-term career goals. Since they met most of their friends in Hillridge through academic pursuits or connections, the contextual and woven relationship between their academic studies and their social world were clear (Brook & Willoughby, 2015; Wortham, 2006). Both their cultural adaptations and the ways in which they understood and navigated a heavily racialized social discourse were repeated threads running throughout their educational experiences and opportunities for success. As we discussed the experience of navigating university life as an international student, the conversations revealed dissatisfaction with their interactions with university faculty and staff as well as systemic barriers and inequities that they felt hindered their short- and long-term success.

Interactions with faculty and staff. As with most undergraduate students, participant engagement with faculty and staff was limited mostly to the classroom and the registrar’s office. Overall, participants felt that their interactions with faculty and staff were generally positive. The negative interactions shared were often specific to times they had to challenge staff members who were implementing policies that the students saw as barriers to their success. The normative role of U.S. citizenship and the lack of training

around working with international students and their unique concerns can create conflicts when the practices and policies which staff members intend to communicate or enforce are in conflict with federal regulations relating to immigrant status. This includes, for example, requiring types of field internships that are not compatible with the F-1 visa status. Additionally, all felt that their stress around funds and adaptation to U.S. culture went unseen. Julio, in particular, noted that faculty and staff did not often understand the variety of factors involved in the academic performance of an international student. He felt that “they [had] been very unaccommodating”, and that their perspective was centered on the fact that “those students [need to] suck it up and adapt”, in contrast to the inclusive values marketed to the public.

Barriers to success. Participants openly discussed feelings of frustration regarding their international student status, as they related to educational opportunities. All participants were confident in their academic performance; their challenges around academics arose outside of the classroom. The intensity of their frustration varied. But, overall, they felt that the system was “rigged” to benefit U.S. nationals. As such, they faced specific challenges in meeting degree requirements and amplifying their earning potential. During our talking circle, Julio and Sita highlighted the focus on penalties for international students. Both their departments and the international student centre focused on teaching students how to avoid falling out of legal status and to be aware of culturally relative considerations, like plagiarism, which could get them in trouble. This information, although valuable, ignores the sociocultural contexts of education and does not support the whole student. For some students, this frustration could build into a sense of disenfranchisement and affect continued enrollment in a programme.

Earning potential. Four participants shared that one major reason for choosing to study in the United States was to improve their financial prospects. In part due to the Caribbean’s colonial history, degrees attained overseas – particularly in the United States and Europe – are highly regarded and have the potential to impress an employer back home. These students saw their first job, especially if they were able to attain one in the United States, as a crucial factor in determining career success. For many F-1 visa holders, the optional one-year OPT work release at the end of their studies can turn into permanent employment, or at least increase base pay when they return home. As Julio noted, the “trick in the system” is that your practical training year starts upon graduation. Students often have to apply for OPT during their final semester and risk not finding employment until significant post-graduation time has passed. The alternative is to wait to apply until a job has been found, which may then leave them without enough time for the application to be processed.

Remarking that many U.S. employers do not want to deal with the federal paperwork, Julio found this process to be “demoralizing and stressful” and a ponderous factor in his emotional health. As the only participant preparing to graduate, his solution was to focus on niche markets with smaller employers that might be more flexible. But, to him, that felt like lowering his standards. His passport, his accent, and his skin colour – factors over which he had no control– carried more weight than the value of his skills, abilities, and experience. Julio’s palpable frustration shifted him frequently between anger and ambivalence as he struggled to cope with feelings of helplessness. Hillside University had no point of contact or institutional system to facilitate a more equitable situation that would help Julio and others like him find positive solutions:

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

Meeting Degree Requirements. All four participants pursuing an engineering degree felt that they had to work twice as hard as their U.S. counterparts to be equally prepared. Julio and Kent were envious that the majority of their U.S.-born colleagues had been exposed to JAVA programming, robotics, and other similar camps or accelerated programmes in their public high schools, whereas in the Caribbean, neither of them had had those opportunities. Noro and Sita echoed this sentiment. They had to start at the very beginning in order to accomplish their goals and felt that they constantly had to prove themselves because of their “foreigner status” and the assumptions correlating that to a lower standard of education. Sita noted that her frustrations were sometimes exacerbated by being female in a male-dominated field. But she found her living-learning community, which was designed to provide support for female engineers, very helpful. Although the housing community could not provide more support regarding immigrant concerns, it still created a safe space to which students could retreat for general support and feelings of belonging.

All three participants from former British colonies – Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, and Jamaica – noted that their previous academic work, although it far surpassed that of their U.S. peers in quantity and complexity, was not valued or respected. Both Noro and Julio had already mastered much of the required content during their final years of high school in the Caribbean. But they still sat “annoyed and bored” (Noro, Meeting 4, Field Notes) through simplified versions of the same classes because their high school credits could not be considered AP credits. Kent’s frustration went even deeper as less than 20% of the college credits he accrued in Barbados were accepted as transfer credits at Hillridge, despite advanced content in the majority of the completed courses. This lack of flexibility and consideration underscores the imposed cultural superiority of the U.S. university

system, which created barriers where there were none. It is entirely possible to evaluate students' individual transcripts to effectively ascertain their academic background.

Challenges with meeting degree requirements were also reflected in the process of finding and securing an internship while enrolled in school, which was required by the engineering department. Julio spoke of his irritation and resentment:

I'm not American so I can't be mad at the system but they get completely different rewards. Masters' student interns who start at BP make about US\$10,000 a month –which in Trinidad is about TT\$60,000 a month, average salary⁵. [...] It's a state school and even the lower scholarships and internships are funded by state sponsors. They want nothing to do with [foreign-born interns]. (*Julio, Initial Interview*)

In his final year, despite being near the top of his class, Julio had still not been able to secure an internship. When he expressed these feelings of resentment during our final talking circle, the trepidation that buzzed through the room was unmistakable. While the younger students brushed the sensation off after a few minutes, the ones closest to graduation continued to ruminate on feelings of “being set up”, not to fail, but to definitely not surpass their U.S. peers.

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the importance of developing sociocultural connections in unfamiliar cultural contexts, maintaining a general sense of well-being during cultural adaptation. It also contextualizes the relevance of the sociocultural aspects of education in a higher education setting. Campus climate influences not only identity development but also enhances or detracts from a student's educational experiences and academic outcomes (McClain & Perry, 2007). This can impact not only individual students, but also the perspectives of minoritized communities about a particular university and, thus, their willingness to continue to enroll their children in that space.

Because Caribbean students are not often studied as a unique population, but subsumed into the general international student population, there is often a disconnect between what they actually experience and what faculty and administration think they are experiencing (Galloway & Jenkins, 2009). They are more culturally connected to their U.S.-born counterparts than students from other regions but they still face challenges that are unique to their status and cultural community. Institutional policies, typically

⁵ Julio noted that the starting salary in Trinidad for an entry level position was approximately TT\$10,000 (US\$1667).

gendered, racialized, and nationalistic (Matus, 2006), can limit students' subjectivities and ignore the power dynamic inherent in their lives.

Through various positive and negative experiences and reflections, this research identified a conscious resistance to any form of adaptation that changed participants' core identifications. There was a definite sense of push and pull as students navigated their transcultural positioning. They presented resistance to the assumption of assimilation in response to the quagmire of racialized norms and expectations imposed upon them at both the campus and community levels. They all see regular trips to their home countries – a financial privilege of their class status – as a rejuvenating force and a way to retain their cultural belonging. Social media, in particular, has created space for students to more easily retain key aspects of their cultural identity. It also helps them to build a support system to combat physical isolation on campus, unlike my own experience a generation ago. Diversity is now part of the conversation; so culturally specific things, like foods and music, are less likely to be ridiculed. It is important to note that universities with larger Caribbean populations may provide greater community access, which could insulate new students from the stresses associated with the transition to higher education. Positioning themselves strongly as Caribbean nationals, regardless of ethnic identification, seemed to limit their experiences with discrimination within their social circles and reposition the power dynamic that relates to their position as the Other.

Academically, more must be done to acknowledge programme- or immigration-related barriers and improve the experiences of Caribbean students in the United States through, as Huffman (2010) suggests, culturally affirming counselling, the celebration of heritage, supportive instructors, and advocacy. The intentional creation and support of inclusive spaces like social groups, sporting organizations, and group living communities are clear sources of cross-cultural support identified in the data. Creating teams of advisors – one within the academic programme and one familiar with immigration regulations – has the potential to alleviate the challenges faced at the intersection of both those contexts. Left untroubled, stressors related to feelings of marginalization or erasure can exacerbate the competitive *disadvantage* these students face due to the limited availability of financial benefits, the pressures of succeeding academically in a new society, differences in social and cultural capital, and the social and networking opportunities missed in order to remain “in status” .

As current institutional rhetoric emphasizes the globalization of the curriculum (Alfred, 2002), the sociocultural context of learning and its connection with academic outcomes cannot be ignored. Simply identifying these concerns is not sufficient. Institutions must focus on how these factors affect student engagement and how to use this knowledge to encourage and support culturally affirming teaching and counselling (Robertson et al.,

2000). Though these efforts will not remove students from the liminal spaces they inhabit, they would represent a step toward developing or enhancing their self-confidence and the actualization of their goals in both the sociocultural and academic realms. By learning more about these encounters and interpretations, institutions of higher education can use this knowledge to improve the educational and sociocultural experiences of their Caribbean students as they encounter extra-cultural norms, expectations, and policies that have the potential to affect multiple aspects of their current and future lives.

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