

**Intercultural Miscommunication: Perceptions and Misperceptions
between Africans and African Americans***

Funwi F. Ayuninjam, Kentucky State University

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INTRODUCTION

The popular melting pot metaphor associated with the United States of America—whether or not well earned—may be a mixed blessing. For one thing, a society that harbors a multiplicity of cultures—all of which recognize and pool from one another's strengths—stands a greater chance of moving forward and faster than a monolithic society. Biologically, and based on Darwin's theories of the evolution of pigeons and of human sexual selection, this argument explains the differences in quality between inbred species and their crossbred counterparts.¹ But far too often melting pots tend to take for granted the intrinsic value and strength of their diversity until that very strength begins to turn against them. The melting pot metaphor reflects a nation whose social institutions are increasingly responding to various pressures to live up to their names. Thus schools, colleges and universities, clubs, places of religious worship, financial institutions, and other social groups are being motivated to join the hearty march toward diversity and multiculturalism through batteries of diversity workshops and by taking a harder look at their recruitment or membership policies and practices—all in a bid to ensure inclusiveness. It is evident—at least on the surface—that some of these efforts are opening up some eyes to the wider world; it is equally true that there is a deepening and widening cultural gulf between various

segments of American society resulting from, but in some cases also confirming, age-old mutual mistrust and suspicions, some of which have been facilitated by the new drive toward political correctness, which enables us to conveniently postpone indefinitely any attempt to resolve or bring to closure daily interpersonal differences.

The need to seek better ways of talking across cultures is urgent, particularly because cultural ignorance afflicts not only children and the less literate populations, but also virtually every facet of the putatively "cultured" community—the intellectual elite, teachers, college students, politicians, and even some of the best in the broadcast industry. Commenting on the never-ending argument that foreigners are coming into the U.S. and taking jobs away from Americans, a National Public Radio (NPR) "Marketplace" reporter on November 14, 1996 said of an "illegal" Mexican employee, "He was short and stolid, like a brick." Another NPR reporter, commenting on Mad Cow Disease, suggested (I believe facetiously) that Britain release its mad cows into Salvador to detonate land mines. Would this reporter have considered recommending that the cows be sent rather to Bosnia, so 25,000 GIs and other European troops might not go into harm's way? Releasing mad cows into a mine-ridden area might help solve the mine issue; however, this type of solution appears unwieldy, given the distance involved. Perhaps more important is the health risk to which the citizens of Salvador might be exposed. On November 13, 2000 another National Public Radio reporter, covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, referred to the Palestinians as "a savage, uncontrollable mob," but described Israel as "an overbearing military" ("Morning Edition"). During the 1996 U.S. vice-presidential debate, candidate Jack Kemp

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described his opponent's economic program as "a welfare system like that of a third-world socialist country." In a jolt of eloquence, one of my colleagues at Kentucky State University described an African's home as follows: "It was a shack. It was totally out of the third world ...corrugated metal sheets...nothing was straight," while yet another, talking about African students, said, "My African students have beautiful names. They're very musical!" While this remark about names might have been well-meaning, more often than not Americans have trouble pronouncing African names, and for such people, remarks of this kind would be disingenuous. But, as usual, there are redeeming moments, as when a Caucasian student in my Integrative Studies class at Kentucky State University called me on a February afternoon in 1997 and reported that she had just come to understand how brilliant Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. was only after doing an assigned reading of his "Letter from Birmingham Jail"—a reading that drove her to tears as she contemplated the terrible loss that the United States suffered in the King assassination.

This paper focuses on stereotyping between Africans (both from the mainland and in the diaspora) and African Americans—both students, and faculty, and staff. It takes a look at various forms of stereotyping mirrored in issues of identity and language use. It seeks to determine their effects, and suggests coping mechanisms that might facilitate looking beyond stereotypes and discovering more positive symbols of the culture continuum.

Historical Perspective

An account of the relations between Africans and African Americans can hardly be fully comprehensible without bringing

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into focus the Pan-African Movement, alias Pan-Africanism. Conceived in the mid nineteenth century in the United States, the Pan-African Movement—"a movement of ideas and emotions"—sought to regain independence, freedom, and, most importantly, dignity for African people in the diaspora.² These were those "who felt themselves either physically through dispossession or slavery, or socially, economically, politically and *mentally* [sic] through colonialism to have lost their homeland."³ Legum also identifies in Pan-Africanism another burning desire: black solidarity—to establish a unifying identity and to achieve a sense of oneness.⁴

The feeling of alienation (expressed by poets like Claude McKay) prompted Jamaican Marcus Aurelius Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, which was premised on Negroes' disengaging themselves from the West.⁵ Albeit a potent emotional appeal, Garvey's movement was politically impotent and physically unrealistic. The subsequent call for solidarity (evoked by writers like Langston Hughes) gradually ceded to an expression of inferiority and insecurity by David Diop, Harold Isaacs, and the like. This disposition was soon succeeded by negritude—outright rejection of inferiority, defiant self-acceptance, and pride of race and color, as reflected in the writings of R.E.G. Armattoe, Leopold Senghor, and Aimé Césaire. As the Civil Rights struggle raged in the United States in the 1960s, pop star James Brown also echoed the same theme in his song "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)" as a way of extolling blackness; being black could not explain low self-esteem. Having dismissed blackness as an illegitimate excuse for abashment, Léon Gontrand Damas and others lucidly advocated a rediscovery of Negroes' forgotten roots through the African Personality Movement—a process born in

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the 1880s in Dr. Edward W. Blyden of the West Indies; it called for authentic African endeavors, not African reproductions of Western traditions or institutions.⁶

The current conflict between African Americans and Africans (including those in the diaspora) may have been epitomized by the nascent rift between Du Bois and Garvey at the turn of the century. Ironically, these two personalities initially met under the aegis of the first Pan-African Congress, held in London in 1900. Even though Du Bois, in his *Souls of Black Folk*, prophetically asserted, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the seas" (54), he did not forestall racial dissonance among Blacks by stereotypically viewing Garvey as a "little, fat, black man; ugly but with intelligent eyes and a big head" (Legum 25). This characterization was intentionally insulting given that Du Bois was of Dutch and French origin, of which he was overtly very proud. Garvey in turn derided Du Bois, a light-skinned man, as a "hybrid"; Garvey would therefore not collaborate with him. Ironically, Garvey died in London in 1940 without ever having visited Africa, while Du Bois died in Ghana in 1963 after becoming a naturalized Ghanaian citizen.

STEREOTYPING

Faculty Perceptions of Students

The *New Webster's Dictionary* defines *stereotype* as "a standardized or typical image or conception held by or applied to members of a certain group" (1981). Stereotypes are among the

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most commonly used logical fallacies, and by the above definition, they presuppose a certain deficiency in reasoning. As a consequence, the stereotypes under consideration here, irrespective of their justification, may largely be dismissed as expressions of ignorance on the part of the users. There is no known single issue on which all Africans concur; neither can any one African American speak for all and to all's satisfaction. Among the terms that some African American faculty have used to describe African students in the United States are these:⁷ "malleable," "of above-average intelligence," "hardworking," "serious," "eager," and "appreciative"; African American students were mostly described as "lazy." While it would be desirable to have college classrooms full of students with the positive attributes, the possibility of having twenty of such students in a single classroom is very doubtful, and the likelihood virtually zero—at least as it pertains to institutions with open-door admission policies. There are 104 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the nation, most of which admit high school graduates who have not successfully completed the Pre-College Curriculum (PCC); most HBCUs have remedial programs in reading, writing, and mathematics. Of the 73 HBCUs that were contacted during this study, 55 of them (75%) said they offered remedial courses, while 18 (25%) said they did not.⁸

Institutions of higher learning like HBCUs—whose enrollments claim at least 50 percent African Americans—are more likely than not to have problems of student retention if high academic standards are set and maintained. Retention would be an even more acute malady if such institutions did not have well-organized remedial or college preparatory programs that inculcated in

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students study habits for success in the academy. Unfortunately, a disproportionate percentage of African Americans are ill-prepared for, and drop out of, high school: 13% (as against 7.3% for Whites).⁹

In his study of pre-college African Americans, White finds that empathy, positive regard, and genuineness led to "significant growth in learning rates, achievement test scores, self-concept, cognitive problem-solving skills, improved attendance records, and fewer discipline problems" (116). Many Africans tend to quickly dismiss less achieving African Americans as being lazy and laid back, as confirmed by the Achievement Motivation Hypothesis (McClelland et al. 1953, Atkinson 1966),¹⁰ that claims that African Americans "lack the commitment to the values of persistence, the pursuit of excellence, future planning, and hard work. They are simply lazy, shiftless, or incapable of responding to the rigors, challenges, and joys of mental discipline" (qtd. in White 120). Embedded in this hypothesis is an outrageous and malevolent stereotype, for the statement negates African American scholarship in toto. White rejects this hypothesis claiming it "fails to take into consideration major differences in the psychosocial realities that Black and white [sic] children encounter in the process of growing up within American society" (120). White goes to great lengths to lambast America's public school system and its educators as fake and misguided and for being focused exclusively on America's disingenuous, competitive corporate structure. Worse still, and rather ironically, he tries to defend African American students against what he labels "the sterile, dull, meaningless content of what passes for education in the typical American

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classroom when there is little assurance of a payoff at the end" (122). This critique is wholly spurious, for White cannot at once be opposed to a materialistic, corporate culture and have an eye on a payoff—the end game; if future payoffs are evil for Whites, what makes them good for Blacks? Yet the very "fake" and "misguided" public school system and educators are the ones largely responsible for preparing Blacks for college.

Unfortunately, White is not alone; many African American scholars share his take on the education polemic. For how long will African American leaders (policy makers, academics, and community activists alike) keep expecting that the rest of society "take into consideration major differences in the psychosocial realities"? Unlimited consideration will only hurt, not help, the intended beneficiaries; that is what the Clarence Thomases, the Ward Connerlys, and the Shelby Steeles¹¹ are preaching, but the faithful are either deaf or think they are hearing Greek.

High Expectations: A "Problem"?

Franklin Delano Raines, Fannie Mae CEO and former Director of the Office of Budget and Management in the Clinton administrations, imputed the steady weeding out of his fellow black classmates in his fast track junior high school class to a "problem of high expectations" (30), suggesting that Blacks may not have been used to such expectations. This problem is still a reality in HBCUs like KSU, as can be observed at end-of-year honor convocations and commencement ceremonies, where a disproportionate number of honors and citations go to Caucasian and international students. Also, international education and study abroad are still largely

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a "white" thing, as black student participation has remained numerically insignificant compared to white student participation.

It is widely agreed in American higher education that international experiences are pivotal to successful liberal arts education. The import of this understanding is readily apparent when one looks at the educational backgrounds of American foreign service personnel. A recent study shows that private liberal arts colleges such as Kalamazoo College, Oberlin College, St. Olaf College, Colgate College, and Centre College produce a significant number of American foreign service personnel and others who pursue careers in international civil service organizations like the United Nations. The success of these colleges in producing graduates who pursue international careers is deeply tied to the international experiences their students receive during their matriculation at these colleges. These institutions *expect* their students to have gained an international experience *before* graduation, and provide them with a wide range of study-abroad opportunities. The result for institutions like St. Olaf College is that 100% of their graduates gain an international experience during their study at the institution.¹²

While the private liberal arts colleges, most of which enroll only a handful of African American students, are succeeding in training students for international careers, the need for more African Americans, Latinos, and minority internationals in the United States foreign service is growing. Currently, African Americans comprise only a small fraction of the total universe of U.S. foreign service personnel. Even though

HBCUs have produced a few prominent foreign service and international civil servants, the need for more African Americans in the U.S. foreign service has never been greater.

A juxtaposition of the success of liberal arts institutions like St. Olaf on this issue with the small number of KSU students who participate in study abroad obviates any doubt that this proposal should be funded. As evidence, of the 2300 students enrolled at KSU during the 1999-2000 academic year, only 5 students studied abroad; in 2000-2001, three did; in 2001-2002, four students could afford the trip; and last year only three could. These numbers represent less than 1% of KSU's student body for each of these three years. The numbers have remained dismally low in spite of the fact that the University is a member of Cooperative Center for Study Abroad (CCSA) and the Kentucky Institute for International Studies (KIIS), consortia of colleges that aim to increase student opportunities for study abroad.

Generally speaking, there are usually several barriers to minority students studying abroad. These barriers in part explain why African American students make up less than 4% of U.S. study abroad students (*Black Issues* 23). For a preponderant majority of the students enrolled at KSU, for example, the main barrier to gaining an international experience is financial. For many, the lack of financial resources is compounded by lack of awareness and classroom experiences that have not encouraged students to gain international experiences. Besides the low representation among Blacks in US foreign service appointment as a result of the lack of international experiences is a relatively narrower view of the world for Blacks than for whites.

Students who understand that education is remunerative

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appreciate the trouble they must endure to obtain it; they cannot have their eyes on the end game for a victory celebration and also have their eyes off the ball before the game is over. A person cannot successfully pursue happiness without being able to differentiate between what is within his or her power and what is not. Thus, Epictetus writes that "...the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint nor hindrance: but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the power of others."¹³ Graduating students simply in order to give them a chance to partake of the American dream—at the cost of educating them—seems to premise the indiscriminate, loose admission syndrome that might be plaguing HBCUs like Kentucky State University, which Bireda qualifies as "a saving grace for many students who otherwise may not have been able to attend college at all due to insufficient preparation or low test scores."¹⁴ The average African student, by contrast, is more likely to understand the relationship between work and achievement; one is a precursor to the other, and they generally attach a high premium to the precursor. Epictetus' enslavement metaphor applies here in the sense that the students who are pushed through have not earned their diplomas, and they therefore will be unable to "defend" the diplomas upon graduation—at the workplace.

Higher Education: US vs. African

A 1996 article in *The Economist* magazine describes sub-Saharan African immigrants as "a highly motivated self-selected group with a strong will to succeed... [They] are the most highly

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educated ethnic group in America. Three-quarters have some college experience; one in four has an advanced degree."¹⁵ This difference in work ethic between Africans and African Americans is reflected in a survey of Kentucky State University's 41 African and African American faculty in early fall 1999. According to the results of that survey, 63% of the respondents considered African students to have either a "good" or "excellent" work ethic, while 10% found them to have either an "average" or "poor" work ethic. On the contrary, only 36.4% of those surveyed thought that African American students had a "good" or "average" work ethic, while 63.6% felt their work ethic was either "average" or "poor."¹⁶ Kane's scathing commentary on fellow black Americans' trailing almost all immigrant groups as far as educational and economic achievement ends with one prescription: "fewer excuses." Kane, a columnist for *The Baltimore Sun*, says, "White racism is not to blame for thinking among black youth that academic achievement is a 'white thing.' That daffy idea took hold among black youth sometime in the 1980s. It is they who gave birth to it, who suckled it, nurtured it and have nearly honed it to perfection."¹⁷ Kane is, nonetheless, not oblivious to the existence and the malevolence of white racism; "[p]lenty of it exists," he says, but he importunes black folk "to awaken to the liberating, even exhilarating, realization that we can succeed on our own and fail on our own without any help from white people whatsoever."¹⁸

It would be logically unsound and statistically misleading to compare African students to African American students. Any such broad comparison erroneously implies that the two peoples are somewhat equally represented—numerically, economically,

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educationally, and socially. On the issue of numbers, the estimated 540 thousand African immigrants in the U.S.¹⁹ pales in comparison to 33 million African Americans for whom the United States is home. The immigrants include the following groups: college-bound high school graduates; degree holders bound for graduate school; civil servants (or government employees) for further training; exchange scholars; diplomats/diplomatic staff; corporate employees; asylum seekers/refugees; and spouses/dependents of immigrants.

Economically, most African students in the United States whom I have met during my twenty years as a student and eventually as a teacher are financially independent. I have also seen in them a socially nurtured disposition toward self-sacrifice, as well as a sense of abashment that keep them working as hard as it takes to pay the bills, take care of the nuclear family in America and the extended family back home in Africa, while also having fun. This is somewhat similar to the Cuban experience in the U.S., except that Cubans have far fewer problems with the INS; because of INS restrictions, many Africans must be full-time students. On the surface and in the short term, this legal requirement can be financially punishing, but over the long haul, advanced diplomas commonly translate into job promotions, salary raises, and increased occupational choices. Yet a research study of Caribbean students in New York city shows that "the immigrant ethos, and the social capital of many Caribbean families are undermined by various forces in American society . . . Those youths who stay closer to their West Indian communities . . . appear to do better than those who attach themselves to Black urban America."²⁰

Based on the foregoing, the educational difference between Africans and African Americans may be explained by the fact that African adults immigrating into the U.S. constitute a self-selecting group; they come by choice. Their transient status suggests they are here largely to achieve specific goals and to go back home. (For almost every African I know or have met, that goal is educational and/or economic.) As a consequence, Africans are generally more focused and goal-oriented, for they realize that time is of the essence, even though some of the immigrants eventually apply for and obtain citizenship, and do not plan to return till political and economic conditions at home "improve." While most Africans (excepting elderly and underage visiting relatives) entering the United States are "ready" for, or are highly motivated to begin, an undergraduate course of instruction, a disproportionate number of their African American counterparts are graduated from high school when they have not successfully completed their Pre-College Curriculum (PCC); they must, therefore, spend the first two semesters of college being primed for college. According to an International Monetary Fund study of patterns of immigration into the United States, "immigrants from Africa consist primarily of highly educated individuals (about 95,000 of the 128,000 migrants [sampled]" (i.e., 74%).²¹ The study goes on to indicate that "[m]igration of Africans with only a primary education is almost nil."²²

In my judgment, there seems to be a belief among many Americans that every one of them is programmed to "have" a college certificate and all that matters is *when* the certificate will be handed to them ceremoniously. Every American tax payer is entitled to social security when he or she retires. Social

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security benefits are, therefore, an entitlement, a right, because the recipient has *earned* the income; it is simply lawfully being returned to him or her. Higher education, on the contrary, is a social club with many privileges for members who must meet set standards for getting in *and* staying in. That "[Kentucky State University's] efforts to move into the mainstream in the last few years have come "into conflict with the heritage of the school'"²³ has to do with the administration's inability or reticence "to raise the bar and demand more from entering students" as other Kentucky public institutions are being pressured to do.²⁴ That KSU and other sister-HBCUs have more lax admission criteria relative to mainstream institutions of higher learning is not necessarily deleterious to academe; the admission policy simply constitutes a second chance for their predominantly black population to benefit from their society's disproportionate blessings. However, just as the college entrance doors are wide open for all who accept the offer to enroll, so should exit doors be open for those who turn out to be shiftless; race or racism cannot account for why many teenagers should stay in college when they ostensibly like the social and economic advantages of diplomas but are not getting the requisite work done. The blemishes of racial discrimination are glaring virtually everywhere one turns in America, but shoving diplomas down students' throats is unlikely to help "level the playing field" of economic opportunity; it might more predictably set undeserving recipients of these diplomas and their descendants further down the path to poverty and hopelessness. And if the pattern is sufficiently replicated around the nation, one generation from now Black America could very well be where it was

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a generation ago, if not further back.

Du Bois vehemently opposed Booker T. Washington's industrial education program as the only education fit for Blacks. Du Bois derided it as the triple paradox of Washington's career, for, he argued, "neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates" (88-89). Du Bois saw education as a foremost liberating force, and his cause has been espoused today by opponents of "Affirmative Action." Its proponents blame it for declining minority enrollment in some of the nation's prestigious institutions of higher learning. But again, there has always been someone or something to blame, hardly ever oneself. Thus, Epictetus writes, "It is the act of an ill-instructed to blame others for his own bad condition; it is the act of one who has begun to be instructed, to lay the blame on himself; and of one whose instruction is completed, neither to blame another, nor himself" (315).

African students seem generally better prepared to contend with the rigors of college life because of the rigid, grueling, unforgiving educational systems from country to country across the continent; there is little room for blame, and hardly does anyone listen to excuses. Africans headed to the U.S. (especially those coming to attend graduate school) hit the ground running, and if they fail, they tend to look inward for an accounting. Comprehensive examinations are the primary determinant of promotion from one grade to the next—from first through twelfth grades. That was also the practice in many universities till recently when the American semester system began to gain currency. Besides the comprehensive examinations set and

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administered by each school, 5th, 10th, and 12th graders must take and pass different nation-wide examinations directly controlled by state boards. Success at these examinations is the only ticket to a five-year grammar (or middle) school, a two-year high school, and a three-year undergraduate course of study, respectively. Since there are no social promotions, and since individual teachers cannot determine whether or not a student passes to the next grade, short of earnest and unrelenting work, non-college material is typically weeded out. The table shows the various grade levels in African English-speaking and African French-speaking countries, as well as their American correspondences.

It should be noted that the educational system described here applies primarily to the African countries that were colonized by Britain and France, which include virtually all of the continent's 54 nations, with the exception of Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and most of the countries in southern Africa. The British and French administrations had the colonies adopt their respective educational, administrative, and legal systems even as the nation states acceded to independence. In most African countries, general education remains the traditional route to success, and for most of those who cannot earn a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree for any of many reasons, professional education may be the only remaining option for a well-paying career in the civil service— America's equivalent of "big government." These schools are very few, and competition to get in predictably stiff. Americans, on the contrary, have almost limitless career options over the course of their lives, and the

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need for a general college education is far less pressing.

Tollett's assessment of the educational opportunities of Blacks that "[American] society either has refused to provide, or has given only grudgingly assistance and resources to blacks to obtain an education" (74) may accurately reflect social attitudes in the few decades preceding and succeeding "Brown V. Board of Education"; this assessment would fall flat on the face if applied to the 1990s, let alone the new millennium. Tollett rightly considers education and training precursory steps to the people's well-being, for these steps prepare citizens for work, leisure, and citizenship (76). In the same vein, Cornel West imputes the waning quality of black leadership in America to "the gross deterioration of personal, familial, and communal relations" (36). Concluding his paper on educational opportunities for Blacks, Tollett identifies four requirements in educators for the effective education of Blacks (77):

- a) genuine and virtually unconditional respect for the dignity and integrity of the black youth;
- b) conviction that all students have a faculty and are teachable;
- c) enthusiasm and commitment to learning; and
- d) competence and learning

Schedule of Examinations in African Primary, Secondary, and High Schools

U.S.A.	Test/Results	African English-Speaking	Test/Results	African French-Speaking	Test/Results
		Class 1			
		Class 2		Cil	
1st Grade		Class 3		CP	
2nd Grade		Class 4		CE 1	
3rd Grade	CAT-5 No student accountability	Class 5		CE 2	
4th Grade	KIRIS No student accountability	Class 6		CM 1	
5th Grade	KIRIS No student accountability	Class 7	CEE — Admission to grammar school; FSLCE —No student accountability	CM 2	BEPC Admission to grammar school
6th Grade		Form 1		6ème	
7th Grade	KIRIS; Portfolios No student accountability	Form 2		5ème	
8th Grade		Form 3		4ème	
9th Grade		Form 4		3ème	
10th Grade		Form 5	GCE "O" Level (≥5	2nde	Brevet Admission to high

			subjects) Admission to high school		school
11th Grade	KIRIS No student accountability	Lower 6th		1ère	
12th Grade Portfolios	No student accountability	Upper 6th	GCE "A" Level (≥2 subjects) Admission to college	Terminale	Baccalauréat Admission to college

LEGEND: **BEPC** =Brevet d' Etudes de Premier Cycle (First Cycle Certificate of Education); **CAT** =Comprehensive Achievement Test; **CEE** =Common Entrance Examination; **GCE "A" Level** =General Certificate of Education Examination–Advanced Level; **GCE "O" Level** =General Certificate of Education Examination–Ordinary Level; **FSLCE** =First School Leaving Certificate Examination; **KIRIS** =Kentucky Instructional Results Information System

Even though Tollett believes that middle- and professional-class Blacks would more readily fulfill these requirements than people of other ethnic origins, most faculty do possess these qualities and usually begin each semester intent on taking their students—Blacks and non-Blacks—to the highest heights. Yet before long, some of the distasteful habits common in students begin to surface. Results of a survey identify the top four items to be tardiness, chatting, not preparing for class, and chewing gum.²⁵ More often than not the culprits are African Americans. Such behaviors tend to rupture and destroy class chemistry and set the stage for the student's failure. While, according to Tollett, a common base of knowledge, learning, and understanding may be a sure way to achieve community,²⁶ it is also a very unrealistic and a most unlikely way given the steady gravitation toward the global village of culture, information, and learning ushered by an increasingly diversified society. Here again, far too many black American educators wilfully take the shorter end of the stick for their offspring when, according to White, Ebonics ought to have the same status as Standard American English (127). (The issue of language will be taken up later.)

The perception that Africans are pricing their American brothers and sisters out of the job market is partially accurate. In an era of corporate inclusiveness, it is at once sufficient and convenient for a firm seeking to diversify its staff—be it genuinely or statutorily—to make no distinction between ethnicity if it wants to hire an African over an African American (as both share the racial classification "Black"). These Africans are labeled "good blacks"; according to a 1996 *Economist* survey, "[e]mployers, when asked, frankly say they prefer to hire immigrants over native black or Latino workers."²⁷ The negative perception does not apply only to African Americans, for Peter Skerry of *The New Republic* writes that, according to the average American, "...immigrants are out competing blacks, and other Americans, on numerous fronts" (19). However, given

the breadth and depth of the American economy, it would be tenuous to claim that an African American was unemployed because of an African.

The Job Market: Africans, African-American Men, and African-Americans Women

There is a three-way parallel of stereotypes relating to the relative advantage or competitive edge of Africans, African-American men, and African-Americans women on the job market. Sociologist Donna L. Franklin has observed that black women have an “unfair advantage” over black men because the women “supposedly are getting jobs black men should be getting” (128). For jobs requiring college-level education, black women outnumber black men by 183-100 [...] Even today, she believes, many employers are more likely to hire black women than men—if only because, to many whites, black men seem less threatening” (129).²⁸ By the same token, Africans have sometime been perceived as more likely to be employed by Whites than African-Americans, barring nationality restrictions. In these circumstances, Africans are considered more malleable and peaceful than their American counterparts of the same race.

For well over a decade now, the United States has begun a steady shift from an industrial- and manufacturing-based economy to a service and information-processing economy. African teenagers and adults immigrating into the U.S. are, based on their level of educational attainment and their motivation (as discussed above), more likely to quickly make the transition to this trend, whereas their African American counterparts, owing to their relative educational limitations, have largely remained confined to blue-collar jobs. (While this scenario may appear to suggest a drift from the primary population under consideration—the campus one, it is also crucial to note that blue-collar jobs await many a college dropout.) As a result, about one out of every two African

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American children lives in poverty, which only partly points to what Cornel West sums up as “the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America” (13). This is a far cry from the experiences of current first-generation children born in the U.S. of African parents, for whom the term “poverty” is unlikely ever to have any direct, real-life signification. Ironically, Dr. Patricia Muhammad, a former African American colleague of mine at Kentucky State University and a co-participant at the American Speech Association (Black Caucus) Summer Conference in 1996, said, to the utter amazement of most of the audience, “Africans have no sense of self-worth.”²⁸ She went on to chart out a strategy for reversing this mind set, beginning with a year-long sabbatical in Ethiopia. If Dr. Muhammad truly had a magic wand with which she could strike self-worth into people, maybe she needed to essay her magic on Americans *imprimis*.

The social difference lies in the institutional racism against African Americans and the nature of the African American family. Wade Nobles states a truism when he says, “Discrimination in education and employment has restricted and continues to restrict, if not eliminate, the paths to development and security for African American people” (94). While racism continues to impede development and security, many other doors of opportunity also continue to open up—doors at which far too many African Americans may not be looking, or seem not to want to see. As a result, someone or something is once more to blame. Racial victimization of Blacks has been part of American society for more than 350 years, and it remains a puzzle that Blacks rub their eyes when they find they have been discriminated against. There are legal safeguards against unfair racial treatment, but the term “fair” and its derivatives are interpreted differently by various ethnic and social groups—Blacks, Whites, Latinos, supremacist groups, Republicans, Democrats, the Christian Right, etc. In the ideal world, no one

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should get his or her every wish; if so, what else would one live to work for? No one ever gets all he or she wanted; the cup looks half full.

The African American Family: Axis of Black Life

The African American family remains the axis of black life in the United States. Nobles attributes some of the common stereotypes associated with African Americans—substance abuse, interpersonal violence, poverty, educational failure, crime, and economic dependence—not to the African American family but to society (97)—again shifting blame. These ills are well documented, and there is seeming agreement on the phenomena but not on their causes—immediate or long-standing. For example, nationwide, African Americans account for nearly 40% of all arrests for violent crimes, even though African Americans represent only 12.7% of the population.²⁹ Victimization rates for these crimes grossly disfavor Blacks. For example, in 1995, for every 100,000 American males aged between 15 and 24, 140 Blacks died as a result of the use of firearms, whereas only 31.4 Whites died under the same condition.³⁰ Similarly, African Americans represent a far disproportionate number of jail inmates (relative to the white inmates) and relative to their actual head count in the country. For instance, the number of black inmates rose from 112,522 (or 41.4%) in 1986 to 221,000 (or 43.3%) in 1996.³¹ These statistics, even if exaggerated, are frightful, and may intensify Africans' fears about quickly embracing African Americans.

Black crime has been attributed in part to poverty, poor schools, low self-esteem, high unemployment, lack of role models, self-hate, misdirected anger at white society; and the environment: both physical (i.e., the neighborhood) and cultural (i.e., the inhibiting culture of racial stereotypes against Blacks). Yet some well-meaning Blacks have helped to promote some of the stereotypes. Toni Morrison, for instance, in

“This is our 1st black president...Blacker than any black person who could ever be elected president in our children’s lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trait of blackness—single parent, poor, working class, saxophone playing, McDonalds and junk food and fun-lovin’ boy from Arkansas” (60).

Visual images of black stereotypes abound on apparels. In April 2004 my son recently received a T-shirt from his uncle, gladly wore it to his nearly all-white, private school the next day, but returned home that afternoon and said his teacher had asked him never more to come to school in that T-shirt. The upper portion of the shirt bore the inscription “I Have A DREam,” and the bottom portion was labeled “DRE.” Between the D and the R in “DRE” was the drawing of a three-leaf plant. The plant, my son’s teacher said, represented a hard drug. My wife and I were embarrassed not to have made the connection early enough; the only picture we conjured was of Dre the musician.

By accepting the stereotype of black poverty, single parenting, and junk food, Morrison not only permitted others to define her but also, as a highly regarded African-American, authenticated the stereotypes for her fellow Blacks; and this confirms Baldwin’s observation that “You can only be destroyed by believing that you are what the white world calls ‘nigger.’”³² But what does “nigger” really mean? Does the term have a positive connotation? Is any race/ethnicity/age more entitled to its use than another? Is it necessarily a vulgarization of an insult? Today’s rap artists certainly relish the term in all its senses; and Gloria Naylor identifies some positive meanings of the term, depending on tone of voice and conversational context (Miller and Webb 132):

1. Used in the singular: expression of *positive distinction*--physically or intellectually (“I’m telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year.

Said he got enough for a down payment on a house.”)

2. Used in the possessive: term of *endearment* (“my nigger”)

3. The pure essence of *manhood* (“You don’t mess with a nigger.”)

In the same vein, the concept of black talent is much more physical (sports and entertainment) than artistic or academic. Charles Beady, Jr., president of Piney Woods (a black boarding school outside of Jackson, Mississippi), remarks that he “finds his male students ‘so bright, so inquisitive, so interesting, so anti-education [and] so into being cool they feel compelled to hide their intellect’ ”³³ My daughter, who had just left a private middle school to start school in a public institution, was quick to adjust to lower educational standards, insisting to me did not want to be differently!

Interpretation of History: Two-way Curricular Vacuum

Nobles acknowledges the sad fact that the denigration of Africa and its culture constituted the moorings for denigrating African Americans and the African American family (97-98). Wamba, a Congolese paternally and an African American maternally, is torn between both worlds and, in *Kinship*, a masterpiece of a journal, recounts his feelings about both peoples as follows:

I came to realize, as my mother had, that African Americans are not always embraced as long-lost kin when they emigrate to the ‘motherland.’ I also came to realize that many African Americans do not look on their Africa heritage with pride or even a sense of identification; and, as I learned personally and often painfully, many African Americans not only fail to identify with one another, but look on one another with scorn, resentment, or even hostility. (9-10)

Yet, as if African Americans had forgotten their own social history, some of their ablest self-anointed spokespersons have succeeded to infect their fellow African American folk with the same stereotypical depiction of Africa as a *country* with a worthless, debased, or deviant culture (if any). Africa is readily associated with disease, poverty, need, corruption, and poor government. No balanced assessment of an African country can overlook any one of these afflictions; by the same token, no country on earth is free from them. Keith Richburg, *Washington Post* Southeast Asia correspondent, after a long assignment in Africa, writes,

Was I supposed to travel around looking for the 'good news' stories out of the continent, or was I supposed to find the kind of compelling, hard-hitting stories I would look for any other place in the world?...Was I not to call a dictator a dictator, just because he was black? Was I supposed to be an apologist for corrupt, ruthless, undemocratic, illegitimate black regimes?

...Pan Africanism, as I see it, prescribes a kind of code of political correctness in dealing with Africa, an attitude that says black America should bury its head in the sand to all that is wrong in Africa, and play up worn-out demons of colonialism, slavery and Western exploitation of minerals. Anyone who does, or writes, otherwise is said to be playing into the old 'white conspiracy.' (27)

Richburg's argument for vigorously exposing Africa's dirty linen is sound; Africa will never realize its full economic potential and development objectives through the unabashed mismanagement and the lack of accountability of its many unrepresentative

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governments and world-renowned public thieves. However, he would be short-sighted if he did not pursue with equal vigor the remote causes of the economic dislocation and social morass that mark every other country on the continent. Colonialism and Western exploitation of minerals are alive and well in Africa, and a diligent study will divulge that fact. American foreign policy is largely dictated by its “strategic national interests,” and that explains why the United States has continued to do business with the same incurably corrupt governments to which Richburg alludes. It was quite convenient and strategic for President Clinton, while on his week-long maiden trip to Africa in 1998, to visit with Uganda’s Yoweri Museveni, largely considered the mastermind of that country’s recent butchery of innocent civilians; Zaire’s (now Democratic Republic of Congo) Sese Seko Mobutu was a creation of the CIA; Angola’s Jonas Savimbi enjoyed red-carpet White House receptions whenever he visited the U.S. (and he frequently did throughout the 1980s); it took the same Pan-Africanists whom Richburg derides³⁴ to reverse America’s so-called “constructive engagement” policy toward South Africa’s apartheid regime; Ghana’s Jerry Rawlings enjoyed the spite and shun of successive U.S. administrations, even though his economic and social policies were better than those of his American-charmed counterparts on the continent; and most of the weaponry that has sustained armed conflicts in Africa has been duly sold to the belligerents by Western “democratic” governments.

It is, however, utterly pitiful that Richburg, commenting on the Rwandan genocide of 1994, that claimed some 800,000 lives, writes,

If [my] original ancestor hadn’t been forced to make that horrific voyage, I would not have been standing there that day on the Rusumo Falls bridge, a journalist—a mere spectator—watching those bodies glide past me like river locks. No, I instead might be one of them—or have met some similarly

anonymous fate in any one of the countless civil wars or tribal clashes on this brutal continent. And I thank God my ancestor made that voyage. (23)

Richburg here seems to take consolation for not feeling attached to his ancestry in the fact that he feels safe in the United States and does not have to, need to, live in Africa or be part of its brutality. Wamba, the African, the African American, and the journalist, responds to his fellow American and journalist as follows.³⁵

Reading such statements, I felt angry and sad. I wanted to remind this writer that there was more to Africa than war and chaos; I wanted to tell him that I knew another Africa, a place where hardworking people lived peacefully and purposefully and were as appalled by violence as he was. I wanted to point out that I could just as easily thank God that my ancestors had not been enslaved in America, and that I had grown up in Africa and had thus been delivered from the “ongoing tribal clashes’ that have claimed so many young black men in America’s war-torn urban communities; and to let Richburg know that my parents regard America as a brutal killing field, a jungle they hope their sons will survive. (27)

Thus, many of the misunderstandings between Africans and African Americans may have been nurtured by an inaccurate interpretation of history. Sometime in the late summer of 1994, I ran into a middle-age African American at a bus stop in Washington, D.C. No sooner had I identified my nationality (Cameroonian) than he delved into a memorable account of his several sojourns in West and Central Africa in the 1960s and 70s—naming Cameroonian, Nigerian, and Ghanaian towns and politicians, and vividly recounting political events that marked the era. I considered him the brightest traveled black American I had ever chanced upon. Judging him from his apparent scholarship

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and worldly wisdom, I dared to ask him what turned out to be a politically incorrect question: "Why, in spite of your (i.e., African American) interest in Africa, is there so much disconnect between Africans and African Americans?" My August friend glowed and asked me in turn, "Don't you remember you sold us into slavery?" I was so stunned I could hardly find anything else to say to him, and, in my momentary daze, his bus arrived. He conveniently, and delightedly, said he had to go. My question had been prompted by a genuine effort to understand the rift between the two peoples, and I felt lucky to have met an intelligent person who would speak from the mind, not the heart, no matter how blunt his response. I have never since been able to compromise that gentleman's ostensibly deep insight about, and interest in, Africa with his correspondingly shallow interpretation of African history. I therefore dismissed his heart-warming interest in Africa as wholly spurious. Similarly, at the Pan-African cultural festival held in Ghana in 1994, an African American, responding to African charges of indifference toward Africa's suffering, said, "Until there is an admission of African involvement in the slave trade, the healing process will be difficult to realize" (qtd. in Wamba 24-25). Wamba explains black Americans' "bewilderment and pain" about slavery in terms of Africans' seeming ignorance of or indifference to the fates of those abducted and sold into slavery" (144).

Africans' ignorance or indifference may be further proof of their helplessness—either in the face of the inhumanity or, perhaps more so, in its aftermath. The ignorance may be tied to the Eurocentric curricula that have characterized Africa's educational institutions since the second half of the 19th century. Khapoya explains how it all came about:

After colonial rule was established in Africa, the missionaries and the colonial authorities forged a very close working relationship. In most of

colonial Africa, schools were staffed and run by missionaries....Africans were educated to meet the limited need for semiskilled workers in colonial bureaucracies. The missionaries had total control....African customs were discouraged....African languages were banned....The African heritage was ridiculed and suppressed. The goal was to give Africans a new identity by requiring them to use new, Christian names....To qualify for eternal life, one was taught the Christian virtues of forgiveness, submissiveness, and patience. (114-15)

I had a bachelor's degree before I came to study in the U.S. in 1984. My classroom knowledge about black Americans prior to my arrival here was based on what I was taught in 4th grade (class 6), and a brief sociology lesson offered to my university freshman class by a visiting black American professor. Only slowly and imperceptibly have textbooks on African history by Africans been emerging over the past two decades, for most of what exists has been written by Westerners (cf. Njeuma 1989). However, given the increased availability of educational resources and access to historical and cultural information, there is little excuse for what Wamba calls "a seeming lack of interest in slavery and the plight of Africans in America" (144). Television productions like Professor Ali Mazrui's four-part series *The Africans* is an example of such educational resources without a heavy Western penchant. Again, the plight of Africans in America may be no more painful than that of Africans in Africa or the Caribbean. The anguish, that is, hardship, of the latter groups is based primarily on a lack of opportunity to advance their lives relative to the first group that still appears to be locked in a romance with its ancestral home. Nearly half of Brazil's 160 million citizens is black; the Caribbean is settled by Blacks; yet neither of these peoples feel mainland Africa owes them an explanation for how they were rapaciously uprooted from

Africa. The issue of slavery is primarily an academic matter, and will hardly constitute a topic of discussion at the dinner table in Africa, North or South America, or the Caribbean. Yet no academic from any of these spheres can claim to represent people through a pronouncement on race or ethnicity; people should be judged as individuals.

As with any controversy, there are African Americans on the other side of the polemic. In *Kinship*, the author fondly talks about Aunt Edie, a university professor and resident of Tanzania since the 1960s. Edie truly immersed herself in the culture and was fully integrated among the people; she exuded love for the people, and, in turn, was passionately loved by Tanzanians who met her. In many ways, she came across as a fellow citizen, for residents of Morogoro “seemed to appreciate the fact that she spoke excellent Kiswahili and understood the niceties of Tanzanian culture, unlike many other foreigners who settled in Africa. It was impossible to go anywhere with Aunt Edie without running into someone she knew, and she always paused for...greetings and pleasantries” (142-43). The Peace Corps program has also provided an excellent opportunity for African Americans to better touch base with their ancestral home. Ambassador Charles R. Basquet, III served in the Somali Republic from 1965-67, and he relished his two years there as an English and social studies instructor. In response to a Somali’s inquiry as why he had come, Basquet answered, “I am an African American and I came to find my village, I told him, proud of my profundity.”³⁶ Basquet so cherished his experience in Africa that he took a job with the Foreign Service, which eventually earned him key appointments, including an Ambassadorship in Djibouti during the Bush Administration and, currently, the Deputy Directorship of the Peace Corps. Upon his appointment to Djibouti, Basquet said, “I felt I was going home.”³⁷

I have been in touch with Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) since 1984. I was from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s a member of an African-style private

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credit club that was co-founded by Cameroonians and RPCVs resident in the Washington, D.C. area. These clubs are very common in Africa and the Caribbean, and the RPCVs must have liked them enough to want to found one in the United States. Among the club members was an African American RPCV from Haiti, Gail Spence, who often talked fondly of that country and her experience there. Similarly, in a telephone conversation with Dr. Al Bridgewater, an RPCV from Cameroon, he said that, as a civics, logic, and applied mathematics instructor at Cameroon College of Arts, Science, and Technology (CCAST), he found his job satisfying, and the students motivated and a pleasure to teach. He added, "The Peace Corps program opened my eyes to what I really wanted to do in life—teaching." These stories and more are available in various newsletters, like *Cameroon Connection*, published periodically by RPCVs. (*Cameroon Connection* is published by Friends of Cameroon.)

Language: Varieties of English and their Respective Roles

Language constitutes another bone of contention. As a linguist, I have a vested interest in fully fathoming this problem. Many Africans and African Americans seem mutually impatient with or critical of each other as interlocutors. They tend to deride each other's pronunciation but wonder why their conversational partner's speech is unintelligible. Africans want to claim the rhetorical high ground—that if Whites understand them, then they must be speaking *well*. It may well be that Whites are less hostile conversational partners when they speak with Africans, and make tremendous efforts to understand Africans; it may also be that Whites are better, more patient listeners, for I have sometimes had trouble initially understanding Africans from different parts of the continent; it may after all be that Whites sometimes do not understand Africans, but even then they simply ignore the Africans rather than seek to be put through another

Insistence by many Blacks on the preeminence of Black English (alias African American English, Black English Vernacular, or Ebonics) has only fueled the flames of an already explosive issue. White once more misses the point when he supposes that “[t]he linguistically defiant Black child seems to take pride in the usage of Black speech and deliberately refuses to talk like white folks” (127). American English (AE) has several variants (also called dialects or varieties), one of which is African American English (AAE), spoken by African Americans. Unlike AAE, which is ethnic, other dialects of American English are essentially regional, and they include the Northern dialect spoken in New England and in the vicinity of the Hudson River, the Midland dialect spoken in Pennsylvania, and the Southern dialect (Fromkin and Rodman 402). Dialects are commonly marked by distinct characteristics of these grammatical sub-components: phonology (or sound system), morphology (or word formation), lexicon (or word stock), semantics (meaning), and syntax (phrase and sentence formation). Standard American English (SAE) is neither regional nor ethnic; it is a social dialect of American English (Pyles and Algeo 15). It is the language of education, the media, and formal communication—spoken or written. It is therefore also the language of the classroom, and every speaker of English in the United States makes a deliberate effort to accede to that standard, otherwise cross-cultural communication within the country would be very unwieldy, if not utterly impossible. As an example of how varied American English is, the five most recent U.S. presidents represent different dialect regions and speak the English language with different pronunciations (or accents). These presidents are George W. Bush (Texas), Bill Clinton (Arkansas), George H. Bush (Texas), Ronald Reagan (California), Jimmy Carter (Georgia), and Gerald Ford (Michigan).

African professors of English (like this writer) cannot learn every student’s

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English dialect in order to communicate effectively with every member of the class. Standard American English represents a common ground for instruction in English. I have often urged my English Composition/Rhetoric students to treat English as a foreign language while they take the course. By so doing, they can free themselves of biases that could thwart their learning or relearning grammatical rules and rhetorical strategies that would enable them to more effectively target a broader audience or readership. Good verbal and writing skills in standard English are essential for success in the United States. For me to accede to SAE (a second language to me), I deliberately set aside my mother tongue (Mbili), a foreign language (French), and a lingua franca (Pidgin English). Doing this calls for a degree of facility with switching between speech codes, registers, and degrees of formality. It is crucial to be able to switch from informal to formal English, and vice versa. I have observed, through personal conversations with some of my African colleagues at Kentucky State University, that some African American students spurn being taught English by African faculty on the grounds that they (the students) could not even understand them, or simply that they (the faculty) were not native speakers of English. At a Kentucky State University Equity Alliance Committee meeting in spring 1996, I raised a concern to my fellow committee members about disrespectful and disruptive behaviors from a number of my black students, and asked committee members for help; one of them implicitly justified the students' manners by ascribing the attitudes to my accent.

Stereotyping in Britain: Africans vs. Caribbeanists

The dynamic between Africans and Caribbeanists in Britain is quite different from that which obtains between peoples of African descent in the United States. This particular angle of the polemic deserves careful study, which this writer has not yet undertaken;

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therefore, the remarks that follow are tentative, as they are based exclusively on oral interviews with friends and do not reflect any published literature on the subject. For a long time, relations between Africans and Caribbeanists in Britain have been marked by confrontations and stereotyping—an atmosphere that markedly contrasts the robust, brotherly/sisterly relations that typify the two peoples in the United States. There has long existed a pattern of charges and counter-charges, with Caribbeanists viewing Africans as highly tribalistic, class conscious, and snobbish (specifically of African females). Africans are charged with regarding their Caribbean brothers and sisters as descendants from slaves and with not being “black” or “African” enough. African, on the other hand, have largely derided West Indian women for a propensity to have many babies and typically out of wed lock

EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPING: THE CLASSROOM AND THE REAL WORLD

The effects of stereotyping vary with almost each situation in which the stereotype is used. Most of the stereotypes fall into two categories: positive and negative stereotypes. An instructor (African or African American) who thinks or claims that African students are hardworking may inadvertently have unduly high expectations of the students. Conversely, the same instructor who expects little of an African American student deprives the student of achieving his or her full potential in the class. More practically, stereotypes lead some faculty to turn their course syllabi into legal documents and binding contracts between the instructor and the student. A watertight syllabus spells out clearly all expectations for successful completion of the course and includes specific policies on classroom deportment (specifically identifying behaviors that will not be tolerated), attendance, make-up, and manuscript guidelines, as well as a detailed class

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calendar, complete with classroom and homework assignments and test dates. *Nothing* is assumed, except the students' ignorance. Each student is required to read, sign, and return a copy of the syllabus to the instructor. Students who, after signing this "contract," are noncompliant tend to be ignored by the instructor (even if they backslided only once); their momentary misbehavior is taken for defiance or an attempt to "test" the instructor.

Outside of the classroom—in the hallways, the streets, the corporate world—the effects can be entirely different. One important effect I have come to realize is the apparent casual, short-lived friendship ties between the two peoples. Africans seem to have more earnest, mutually dependable associations with white friends than black friends. Africans and African Americans trade accusations on this issue. Keith Richburg, writing about a black American diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, says, "Thomas-Greenfield had never been invited into a Kenyan home" (28). He adds that her experience was so awful that being black in Africa was "an absolute disadvantage" and "[Sh]'d rather be black in South Africa under apartheid than to go through what [she was] going through here in Kenya" (28). There must have been much more at play than we know. Thomas Greenfield's sentiment echoes that of Richburg, who rejoices over the benefits of descending from slaves (23). Her experience in Kenya stands in stark contrast with that of Aunt Edie, who lived (and probably still lives) in Tanzania—across the southward border; in stark contrast with that of Ambassador Basquet, who lived in Somalia—across the eastward border, and much later in Djibouti—northwest of Somalia. Africans tend to receive American guests with open hands and treat them like royalty—with unconditional hospitality. Most Africans I know find that their friendship with African Americans generally flourishes in the work place and occasionally in restaurants, but hardly at home—after work or school. Africans in the U.S. view African

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Americans as their "hosts," who should *first* take them by the hand and "show them around," not vice versa.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no known right prescription for dealing with interpersonal, intercultural miscommunication. Otherwise, this paper would be of little usefulness. Some of the deep-seated problems might be better handled on a personal level—through, say, reading. A genuine discussion might also be useful. A trip to Africa might prove to be personally enriching and fulfilling. Even though African Americans have lived in the United States of America for more than three and a half centuries, and even though their physical separation from the African continent has ensued in a distinct African American culture, the authenticity of that culture still derives from its African essence, which binds us all—mainlanders and diasporians. And that is why the people are more readily called *African* Americans, not merely Americans, although Kofi Opatiri would rather they were called "American Africans," for that would go beyond recognizing their "cultural self" (6); it would give pride of place to the motherland. Opatiri writes, "Being an African says that there is a collective African experience which defines and sustains me to which I am obligated. It is this connection—and my loyalty to it—that will, in the final analysis, have the greatest beneficial impact upon the growth and development of black people in America and throughout the world" (6). That collective experience is brought to life through not only our physical attributes that attest to our relatively recent ancestral ties to a continent, but also our instinctive sense of affinity as "brothers" and "sisters," and our sense of racial alienation and oppression.

Therefore, Richburg's and Thomas-Greenfield's desire to go "home" to America is more than an expression of homesickness; it is also an expression of

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anguish and intense disgust with *some* Africans resulting from their experiences in *some* African countries. That these two African Americans apparently spurn the Africans they have encountered, and that they have no respect for any African government, deserves attention because the critics are not just average or totally ignorant folk; they are ambassadors in two important fields—journalism and the Foreign Service, respectively. But again, they are fully entitled to “moving on” and out of unwelcoming milieus, without daubing them or *all* their residents. And this goes to Africans as well. It must be a much more profound understanding of human nature that has kept spurring Africanists like Randall Robinson of Transafrica, Reverend Leon H. Sullivan of Opportunities Industrialization Centers, Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, Vivian Lowery Derryck of the African-American Institute, C. Payne Lucas of Africare, and more.

While there may exist no known right answers to questions of intercultural misunderstanding, it is hoped that by engaging Africans and African Americans in an open intellectual “conversation,” all involved may very well be contributing (in however small a manner) toward a better coexistence of the peoples. Africans and African Americans take pride in a common ancestry—Africa, and if they fail to see the need to collaborate for their mutual interests, they should do so for their descendants—who might find that need. This thinking is in line with Cornel West’s assertion that “the most valuable sources for help, hope, and power consist of [Blacks] and [their] common history” (6). I, therefore, hope that whatever feelings this piece has stirred in the reader should constitute not an excuse for further grudging or a louder death song, but rather a challenge to some of the reader’s basic assumptions about himself or herself and others on the one hand, and, on the other, about his or her culture and other cultures.

Notes

* The first version of this paper was published under a similar title: "Perceptions and Misperceptions," but bearing the same sub-title. Some of the data are updated, and a section on African-American men-women stereotyping and another on the British perspective on race relations added.

1. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin's discussion of domestic pigeons under the heading "Variation under Domestication," and in *The Descent of Man*, under "On the Races of Man," concludes that when domestic breeds are crossed, they produce fertile offspring, pp. 27-28 and 198-99, respectively.

2. Coli Legum. *Pan-Africanism: A Short Political Guide*, p. 14.

3. Ibid., p. 15.

4. Ibid., p. 16.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid., p. 264.

7. Based on two sources: focus group meetings held in spring 1998 at Kentucky State University involving the university's African and African American faculty and staff; and Faculty Survey, item #3, Appendix.

8. Based on a telephone survey of HBCUs conducted in spring and summer 1999.

9. National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Educational Statistics 1997*, p. 111.

10. John Atkinson. *A Theory of Achievement Motivation*. New York: John Wiley, 1966; D. C. McClelland et al. *The Achievement Motive*. New York: Irving Publishers, 1953.

11. Shelby Steele. *The Content of Our Character*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas is opposed to "Affirmative Action," and so is Ward Connerly, a member of the University of California Board of Regents, who spearheaded an end to race-based quotas in the college recruitment.

12. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, August 2, 2001, p. 25.

13. Epictetus. "The Enchiridion." *Foundations of Cultures*. Ed. George Weick et al. Acton, Mass.: Copley Publishing Group, 1995, p. 313.

14. Saba Bireda. "Kentucky State's Future: Historically Black University Wrestles with Funding, Purpose." *The Courier-Journal* 5 Sept. 1999: D1.

15. "Race in America: Black Like Me." *The Economist* 11 May 1996: 27.

16. Based on Kentucky State University faculty survey, item #4, Appendix.

17. Gregory P. Kane. "Commentary: For African Americans, the Time for Using Racism Excuses Should Stop." *The Detroit News* 26 May 1996. Online. *Detnews.com* 21 Sept. 1999, p. 2.

18. Ibid.

19. U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1989*, p. 10.

20. "Race in America: Black Like Me." *The Economist* 11 May 1996: 28.

21. William J. Carrington and Enrica Detragiache. "How Extensive Is the Brain Drain?" Online. *Finance & Development*. 36.2 (1999): p. 48.

22. Ibid.

23. See fn. 13.

24. Saba Bireda. "Kentucky State's Future: Historically Black University Wrestles with Funding, Purpose." *The Courier-Journal* 5 Sept. 1999: D4.

25. Based on Kentucky State University faculty survey, item #13, Appendix.

26. Kenneth S. Tollett. "Universal Education, Blacks and Democracy: The Expansion and Contraction of Educational Opportunities." *Race: Twentieth Century Dilemmas—Twenty-First Century Prognoses*, p. 10.

27. See fn. 19.

28. US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission 1999, qtd in Ellis Cose 128.

28. Speech Communication Association Summer Conference. Kentucky State University, 21-23 June 1996.

29. U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, p. 14.

30. U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, p. 108.

31. U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1998*, p. 228.

32. Qtd. In Ellis Cose, *The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America*, p. 13.

33. Ibid, p. 87.

34. Keith Richburg. "Continental Divide." *The Washington Post* 26 Mar. 1995, pp. 17-21, 30-33.

35. It is by pure coincidence that Wamba and I have written about this subject matter, have drawn from several of the same sources, and seem to share identical perspectives. My paper was originally presented at a conference of the Society of Research on African Cultures (SORAC) conference at Montclair State University in October 1998, and I had had focus group meetings on the subject with my colleagues at Kentucky State University the previous spring semester.

36. Charles R. Basquet, III. "Finding My Village." *Volunteer Stories: Real Stories from around the Globe—Africa*. Online. *Peacecorps.gov* 21 Sept. 1999, p. 2.

37. Charles R. Basquet, III. "Finding My Village." *Volunteer Stories: Real Stories from around the Globe—Africa*. Online. *Peacecorps.gov* 21 Sept. 1999, p. 3.

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