

**WHAT'S IN A CONSTRUCT? PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN
HOUSTON'S NIGERIAN CENTRAL**

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Black identity is often homogenized in the United States, thereby leaving its subgroups often ignored and disenfranchised. This study explores the relationship between Yoruba Nigerians and African Americans in the southwest area of Houston, Texas, intentionally focusing on two subgroups within black identity and on specifically located national identities. This study approaches the field of black studies through a performance studies lens, drawing upon John Austin's theory of performative utterances. The present study addresses the following research questions: What are Yoruba Nigerian constructs of African American identity? What are the factors that (re)shape these constructs? What is the significance of these constructs in the lives of Yoruba Nigerians in America?

The study data consists of interviews with 10 Yoruba Nigerians who currently live in the Southwest Houston area. The interviews revealed that Yoruba Nigerian perceptions of African Americans are largely categorized by stereotypes, such as disrespectful, criminal, uneducated, lack of own mindset, and irrational. This study also discusses, based on the interviews, four main factors which contribute to the formation of such stereotypes: media representation, personal encounters, hearsay, and perception of opportunity in America. The study then explores the significance of Yoruba Nigerian stereotypes of African Americans for Yoruba Nigerians' economic gains in the United States. This study found a paradox between the Yoruba Nigerians' perceptions of African Americans and their awareness of being primed to hold such stereotypes. The study concludes with a discussion of Yoruba Nigerians' possible desire for cultural and identity preservation in order to explain such paradox.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The first time I heard the word “Akata,” I was hanging out with Yemi and a group of Nigerian¹ women in an apartment located in Southwest Houston. I met Yemi during the spring semester of our freshman year at Prairie View A&M University. Despite my initial negative perception of Yemi as a loud, talkative, overly self-confident teenage girl (I later learned she had quite a few negative perceptions of me as well), we learned to enjoy each other’s company and grew to see each other as friends. Yemi is a Yoruba-Nigerian. Meeting Yemi was my first *memorable* encounter with an African.² It is through—and because of—our friendship that I began to (re)consider my own identity, to rethink what it means to be and identify as an African American³.

Yemi began including me on her trips on weekends and during breaks to her home in Southwest Houston, what she and many Nigerians living in that area humorously call “Nigerian

¹ I use the term “Nigerian” for people of Nigerian ancestry who were born and grew up in Nigeria or, at least, spent a significant part of their early years in Nigeria. There are many different ethnic groups in Nigeria (i.e., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, etc.). I do not engage with the complexities of their differences because all my interviewees are Yoruba-Nigerian.

² I use the term “African” for African people who were born and grew up on the continent of Africa (the term would apply also to people who were born in a country other than Africa but moved to Africa at a young age, i.e. the time before a child learns to speak) and came to the United States through one form of migration or another. This includes those who may have migrated to other countries and finally to the United States after having a cultural foundation in Africa. By “cultural foundation” I mean an ability to understand and speak a regional language or dialect from their specific African country of origin as a result of growing up in Africa). In this sense, identity is more about cultural heritage than citizenship. I use the term “African” also for second-generation Africans born in the United States but who have strong ties with their immigrant parents’ African cultural heritage and grew up speaking their parents’ regional African language or dialect.

³ I use the term African American for the descendants of Africans brought to the United States through the transatlantic slave trade.

Central.” In fact Nigerians represent the largest number of Africans living in Houston.⁴ Although I am a native Houstonian, I was not familiar with “Nigerian Central.” I grew up on the Southeast side of the city. So traveling to Southwest Houston was like going to a place I had never visited before. It was during one of such trips in the fall of 2011 that I met a group of Nigerian women at an apartment. The apartment was very small and compact, nothing particularly noticeable about the place. We were all in very close proximity to one another as we spoke in a style similar to a round-table discussion. Some people sat on a couch, some in chairs, and others on the floor.

I do not remember the details of our conversation in the apartment that day. In fact, I recall that, at the time, I did not fully understand what the conversation was about. I felt more like a spectator than a participant. They spoke a combination of Yoruba, English, and West African Pidgin English. I did not understand the Yoruba language and Pidgin English at all then. In trying to keep up with the conversation, I asked Yemi on the side from time to time to translate it into English for me. I noticed that she did not translate the word “Akata.” So I asked her to translate it. The other women overheard me. My question seemed to cause a shift in atmosphere. Each one of them offered her explanation and justification for the term. The general consensus among them was that the word simply referred to an “African American” person. During that encounter, I half-accepted their explanations because I sensed that something more was missing from the explanation. It was the same feeling one gets when they’re not included in the inside joke. You know you are missing a key clue, but you do not know what it is. Later that day, I asked Yemi again what “Akata” meant and if she could be specific. I even asked why Nigerians use that term for African Americans. Her response made me feel that something was

⁴ Gambino, Trevelyan, and Fitzwater, “The Foreign-Born Population from Africa: 2008-2012,” U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed April 24, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/acs/acsbr12-16.pdf>.

missing, but I did my best not to show my disappointment with her vague response and the apparent negative connotation of the word. I replied, with a little attitude I admit: “I don’t want to be called an *Akata*.”

The term “Akata” is most often used by Yoruba Nigerians to refer to African Americans in the United States whose ancestors were brought to the U.S. through the transatlantic slave trade. The term usually has negative connotations of laziness, unreliability, and unpredictability.⁵ Some Yoruba Nigerians, however, have repurposed the term to only refer to African Americans without any associated meanings. My encounter with Yemi caused me to think about the word “Akata” many times afterwards. Not always in particular situations, but sometimes randomly when I am sitting alone or when I meet new Nigerians and self-consciously wonder if they think of me as such. Once I got to know some of them pretty well, I would sometimes just randomly ask, “What’s an Akata?” In various other conversations with Nigerians, often about this word, I noticed their myriad of negative descriptors for African Americans, such as lazy, disrespectful, and “uncultured.”

I was very surprised by the openness with which some Nigerians disclosed their negative perceptions of African Americans to me. I asked a fairly close Yoruba Nigerian friend of mine once why this is so. She said that it is because I am not a “typical African American” and I am actually interested in learning about Nigerian culture and language. I admit I was somewhat flattered, but her statement also seriously bothered me because obviously a “typical African American,” as it is with any other racial/cultural identity, does not exist. I still hear comments

⁵ For further discussion and historical contextualization of the term “Akata” see Godfrey Mwakikagile, *Relations Between Africans and African Americans: Misconceptions, Myths, and Realities*, 3rd ed. (Dar es Salaam and Pretoria: New Africa Press, 2007: 127-131); and Kwame A. Insaadoo and Roxanna Pearson Insaadoo, *The African Meets the Black American* (Bloomington, IN: Author House, 2006: 33-34).

like the one above in my trips to Nigerian Central and when hanging out with Nigerian friends. These conversations led me to question more broadly how Africans, particularly Yoruba Nigerians, perceive African Americans.

African Immigrants in Context

Scholars have conducted studies on American university campuses that focus specifically on perceptions African and African American students have of one another and the effects these perceptions have on their relationships with each other. Jennifer V. Jackson and Mary E. Cothran, in “Black versus Black: The Relationships among African, African American, and African Caribbean Persons,” conduct a study on various university campuses in the D.C.-Maryland metropolitan area. The study consisted of a survey questionnaire which inquired about cross-cultural communication, education, and thoughts and stereotypes about the African diaspora that may have been influenced by historical, social, and psychological factors. The outcome of the survey revealed that stereotypes existed between the groups but also that members of each group were willing to relate to others of African origin.

Another article which focuses on the perceptions Africans and African Americans have of one another is “Bridging the Gap: African and African American Communication in Historically Black Colleges and Universities.” In this article Kehbuma Langmia and Eric Durham are primarily concerned with the ways in which perception and stereotype affect intercultural interactions between the two groups. Using focus group sessions on the campuses of Bowie State University and Howard University, they examine three emergent themes: intragroup stereotypical perspectives of the other, cross-cultural communicative tension, and the desire for improved cultural dialogue.

Problems and Questions

My interest in how Yoruba Nigerians perceive African Americans stems also from several problems with previous studies that include discussions of the perceptions that Africans have of African Americans, namely the studies by Cisco-Titi, Jackson and Gothran, and Langima and Durham. First, each of these previous studies were conducted on just one type of African community in the United States—those on college campuses—which can lend itself to a limited age range.⁶ I will expand the scope of knowledge on the perceptions by adding a new lens of focus. While my research may include college students, its subjects are defined more by their national and ethnic identity than their institutional affiliation, thereby expanding the age range of interviewees. I stress the importance of defining a specifically located national and ethnic identity because cultures and traditions, as in other continents, vary throughout Africa and even within the borders of its many countries. Based on my longtime personal relationships with Nigerian and Kenyan friends, I have come to understand that their belief systems and ultimately cultures are different. This is shown in the way they dress, how they talk, and the food they eat. Second, these studies homogenize African identity. The continent of Africa is often not recognized for its national and ethnic diversity. I avoid this homogenizing tendency by giving focus to a specifically located national identity—Yoruba Nigerians in the southwest area of Houston, Texas. Third, while previous studies ask questions of perceptions that are necessary for

⁶ For examples of previous research that discuss stereotypes and perceptions among Africans and African Americans on college campuses see Cisco-Titi, “Stereotyping, Social Distance and Language Attitudes as Factors in Communication among African, African-American and African-Caribbean University Students,” diss. Howard University, 1991; Jackson and Cothran, “Black versus Black: The Relationships among African, African American, and African Caribbean Persons,” *The Journal of Black Studies* 33, no.5 (2003): 576-604; and Langmia and Durham, “Bridging the Gap: African and African American Communication in Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” *The Journal of Black Studies* 37, no.6 (2007): 805-26.

understanding African attitudes towards African Americans, they do not get to questions about how these perceptions are acquired. Taking into consideration how these perceptions are acquired helps us understand that such qualities are not necessarily inherent in African Americans, but rather are social constructs that may be reinforced or changed. Fourth, previous studies have comprised mainly of surveys and questionnaires and one focus group. Instead, I conduct interviews that allow for more intimate, personal conversation and an opportunity to take into account the contingency and improvisation that gives meaning to what people say.

Towards addressing the problems listed above I asked the following questions: *What are Yoruba Nigerian constructs of African American identity? What are the factors that (re)shape these constructs? What is the significance of these constructs in the lives of Yoruba Nigerians in America?* I recognize that the ways that Nigerians perceive African Americans and the ways that African Americans perceive Nigerians both have a profound effect on the relationships that these groups have with one another. However, to keep my research to a manageable scope for a Master's Thesis, I chose to focus specifically on Yoruba Nigerian perceptions of African Americans. Given the connection between the perceptions Africans have of African Americans and the relationship between the two groups, my research has the following significance. First, I consider my work as a contribution to the conversations that are necessary for these groups to develop a better understanding of each other. Second, my work furthers the understanding of Yoruba Nigerian perceptions of African Americans, addressing why these perceptions exist, in order to help pinpoint the source(s) of such perceptions. Finally, my work challenges the homogenization of black identity by purposely and explicitly revealing my interlocutors' national and ethnic identity. Africans are more often than not immediately interpolated and

defined as “black” in the United States. As I mentioned earlier, there are cultural differences between people on the continent of Africa and between Africans and African Americans.

With such a large number of West African immigrants in Houston, particularly in the southwest region of the city, communities of people of African descent (this includes Africans and African Americans) in the city have become complex and diverse. Not only does this study offer insight into one constituent group of this community, but it also helps us understand that group’s relations with another constituent group, African Americans. My work contributes to the fields of Africana/African Diaspora Studies and to Performance Studies. My study of Nigerian and African American relations in Houston allows me to contribute to Africana Studies by providing important insights into the variations within black identity. In the field of performance studies, my research explores stereotypes as performative markers of difference.

Method

The research in this thesis is based on interviews I conducted. Between 5 September 2015 and 8 November 2015 I interviewed a total of 10 people, most of whom I have known for a few years. The interviewees consist of 6 men and 4 women between the ages of 28 and 49. All of the interviewees are the first set of Yoruba Nigerians in their family to settle in the U.S., and less than half of them hold citizenship status. 8 of the interviewees hold at least a Bachelor’s degree and 5 hold graduate degrees. Two of the interviewees do not have formal education. 4 of the participants are currently working as engineers, 1 is an accountant, 2 are self-employed, and 3 are currently unemployed (2 of which are by choice). I audio-recorded each interview and transcribed them. To help me answer my first research questions “*What are Yoruba Nigerian constructs of African American identity?*” I asked my interviewees: What does it mean to identify as Yoruba Nigerian and how does that differ from what it means to identify as African

American? What are the differences and similarities between Yoruba Nigerians and African Americans? What comes to mind when you hear the term ‘African American’? To help me answer my second research questions, “*What are the factors that (re)shape these constructs?*”, I asked: What did you think about African Americans prior to arriving in the U.S.? Have those ideas changed since you’ve been here? If so, how? Please describe a memorable encounter you experienced with African Americans? How did that experience confirm or challenge your perceptions about African Americans? Finally, to help me answer my third research question, “*What is the significance of these constructs in the lives of Yoruba Nigerians in America?*”, the questions I asked included the following: Have you ever felt African American identity was imposed on you? If so, how and why? What is the significance of the differences between Yoruba Nigerians and African Americans as it relates to your everyday life? Interviews are supposed to be dynamic conversations between the researcher and subject. Fontana and Frey define interviews as “active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results.”⁷ In other words, the interview is a conversation, in which the interviewees’ answers prompt more unforeseen questions.

I conducted interviews at two sites. The first site is a restaurant entitled Afrikiko. This place serves both Ghanaian and Nigerian foods. For this reason, it provided a comfortable and familiar atmosphere for Yoruba Nigerians to talk openly with me during the interviews by serving as an outlet where they have more cultural freedom. The second site is Starbucks. I chose this site primarily because coffee shops are a convenient place to talk freely and are usually conducive for conducting interviews because the atmosphere is very lax and informal. Both sites are located along the southwest strip of Bissonnet St. in Houston, Texas. Because Bissonnet St.

⁷ Fontana and Frey, “The Interview,” 646.

is one of the more popular streets in the Southwest Houston area, the Yoruba Nigerians I interviewed, all of whom live in the Southwest Houston area, were likely to know where each restaurant is located. Moreover, both restaurants were not far from where many of them live. Both of these factors were part of the reason why I chose these two sites.

In general, Southwest Houston is a seemingly poor area of Houston. Many of the buildings look old from the outside, like they have not been updated in years. The roads are bad, with potholes and faded pavement markings for lane separation. It is also a very busy area. The city's major tollway passes directly through the area. It is important to point out that if you are looking at a neighborhood map of Houston, then the official area that is called Southwest is not actually the area I am referring to in this thesis. The area I am describing is actually located partially in Bellaire and Sugarland, but for many of the locals, we still refer to that general area as Southwest Houston. One of my favorite African grocery stores, located near the Afrikiko restaurant on Bissonet St., is even titled "Southwest," though it is officially located in the Bellaire neighborhood.

Theory

Stereotyping as Performative Utterance

In relation to difference, I want to discuss how stereotypes can be a performative marker of difference. According to John Austin, a performative "indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something."⁸ I argue then that speaking stereotypes, and simultaneously subscribing to them (or having sincere belief in them), is also performing an action. Such action is related to identity construction or formation. When stereotypes are spoken, the speakers are simultaneously

⁸ Austin, *How to Do Things*, 6-7.

marking the identity of those being stereotyped and marking their own identities in terms of difference. Austin explains, “When I say, before the registrar or alter, ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.”⁹ The same rings true for when people speak stereotypes. They are also involved in identity formation of both the stereotyped and themselves. For example, to use a stereotype to describe another group, is also to say that said stereotype does not describe you or people in your group. Therefore, stereotyping, specifically referring to speaking stereotypes, is performative because it involves the speaker actively constructing his or her own identity at the very time (s)he speaks the stereotype. In other words, the very act of stereotyping simultaneously being a marker of identity makes it a performative utterance.

I want to emphasize the importance of understanding stereotyping as performative utterance. It speaks to the ways in which people not only actively define others, but also simultaneously define themselves in opposition to others. When we understand stereotyping in this way, as a performative marker of difference, then we can see that stereotyping is another way, albeit misguided, in which to preserve and express our own unique identities and even to combat the identities imposed upon us. For my interlocutors, this means preserving and asserting their own cultural identities and marking the diversity among blacks in the United States.

Chapter Outline

In chapter one, "Constructing the African American," I identify and discuss the five major Yoruba Nigerian stereotypes of African Americans: disrespectful, criminal, uneducated, lack of own mindset, and irrational. I then discuss an exception to the stereotypes discussed in the interviews: adoption of Yoruba Nigerian culture. Such exception is based on some of my interviewees' belief that if an African American adheres to Yoruba Nigerian culture, then

⁹ Ibid., 6.

Yoruba Nigerians are likely to view those African Americans as different from ‘other’ African Americans. Additionally, I attempt to understand why some of the Yoruba Nigerians I interviewed held sustained belief that African Americans who adopt Yoruba Nigerian culture are exceptions to the African American stereotypes previously described, rather than negating the African American stereotypes altogether.

In chapter two, “Visit the Foundation,” I attribute three main factors to the construction of the negative African American stereotypes: media representation, personal encounters, hearsay, and perception of opportunity in America. In chapter three, “Useful Stereotypes: On Economics and the Performance of Difference,” I explore the significance of Yoruba Nigerian stereotypes of African Americans for Yoruba Nigerians. I found that these stereotypes can be significant for Yoruba Nigerians’ economic gains.

CHAPTER II: CONSTRUCTING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN

“The myth is then, not necessarily false. It might happen to be true. It may happen to be partly true. If it has affected human conduct a long time, it is almost certain to contain much that is profoundly and importantly true. What a myth never contains is the critical power to separate its truths from its errors. For that power comes only by realizing that no human opinion, whatever its supposed origin, is too exalted for the test of evidence, that every opinion is only somebody’s opinion.”

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 122

While my research is framed to discuss Yoruba Nigerian *perceptions* of African Americans, I primarily found these perceptions to be stereotypes. In this chapter, I seek to present and explain many of the African American stereotypes introduced by the Yoruba Nigerians during my interviews. I hope to show that the Yoruba Nigerians I interviewed form these particular stereotypes to help them make sense of African Americans and their culture, particularly in terms of difference, rather than similarity. These stereotypes are predicated on the assumption that African American child-rearing techniques are too lax. An exception to the stereotypes is when an African American adheres to Yoruba Nigerian culture, then they are likely to be viewed as different from ‘other’ African Americans. Some of the Yoruba Nigerians I interviewed held sustained belief that African Americans who adopt Nigerian culture are exceptions to, rather than negations of, the African American stereotypes they described. In my attempt to understand my interlocutors’ reasoning for such belief, I found that they ascribed to the subtyping model of stereotype change.

On Stereotypes

‘Stereotypes’ refer to “a set of traits that are used to explain and predict the behavior of members of a socially defined group.”¹⁰ A stereotype, or the act of stereotyping, is a complex phenomenon that scholars in the field of psychology, sociology, and other fields have theorized and explained in much detail. For a discussion of stereotypes, it is useful to begin with a basic

¹⁰ Stephan and Rosenfield, “Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes,” 92.

understanding of categorization and groups. Cognitive psychologists have placed a major emphasis on categorization within stereotype research. Eleanor Rosch developed her theory of prototypes of categories, suggesting that there are some members of categories who better exemplify the category (who she refers to as exemplars) than others.¹¹ She suggested that by identifying exemplars, whether typical or atypical of their categories, we are able to develop prototypic examples of categories which help us better understand how to categorize. What Rosch identifies is the very essence of creating stereotypes. Establishing “prototypic examples of categories” is how people make sense of other identities outside of their own, whether in relation to race, gender, class, and so on.

Thus far, I have discussed a cognitive approach to stereotype research. However, stereotypes are not only products of people’s cognitive functioning; they are also social products. In this regard, stereotypes are often associated with our group memberships in terms of culture and identity. David J. Schneider defines ethnocentrism as the “tendency to favor one’s own group and derogate other groups.”¹² In this regards, ethnocentrism gives people a personally justifiable cause to define others on their own terms. Such outcomes become a deeply imbedded belief system or mindset that has evolved into a stereotype. William Graham Sumner, the American sociologist discussed ethnocentrism in relation to cultural standards. He referred to ethnocentrism specifically as “this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.”¹³ These definitions of ethnocentrism point toward a type of in-group bias, or the preferential treatment of those in our own groups. Another important concept related to group membership is what social

¹¹ Rosch, “Principles of Categorization,” 36.

¹² Ibid., 230.

¹³ Sumner, *Folkways*, 13.

psychologists have termed out-group homogeneity. Basically, this refers to how people in a group (in-group members) view those outside their group (out-group members) as homogeneous. James L Hilton and William von Hippel posit that a “consequence of the so-called out-group homogeneity effect is that people believe that most out-group members share the attributes of the specific out-group members whom they encounter and that group-level stereotypes are likely to describe individual group members”, and not actually the entire group.¹⁴ In other words, people judge an entire group based on the stereotypes they form of a few members of the group whom they have encountered. What they are explaining is another process of stereotype formation based on one’s experience that indicates value for one’s group over other groups.

The ‘Typical’ African American

I heard many stereotypes of African Americans in my interviews of Yoruba Nigerians in Southwest Houston. I discuss them here in order of frequency, how often each stereotype was mentioned in the interviews. The first theme that emerged from the interviews is of the African American as disrespectful to elders. This mostly surfaced during discussions about cultural differences and was the most frequently occurring stereotype. Tobi, a full-time mother and wife who immigrated to the U.S. nearly 17 years ago, stated: “[African Americans] are disrespectful because they don’t have good homes and good upbringing. Most African Americans come from broken homes... and if they come from broken homes, they don’t have proper upbringing where there’s a father or mother to guide them and tell them ‘This is how you are supposed to relate in the society’.”¹⁵ Tobi described a type of cause and effect relationship: African Americans’ lack of respect is the effect of not having a good home, or growing up in broken home without a

¹⁴ Hilton and von Hippel, “Stereotypes,” 247.

¹⁵ Oluwatobi Ogundiya, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

father or mother to teach them the proper way (a broken home). Pastor Wumi, co-founder and co-pastor of Dominion International Center (DIC), also indicated that compared to Nigerians African Americans are disrespectful to their elders and to people in authority, and attributed this to the difference between child-rearing practices in America and Nigeria. He stated,

There's a certain level of laxity, which is misinterpreted as liberty, in the way children are raised here [in America] versus in Africa or Nigeria...It's firmer kind of, more strict. And, um, ultimately children turn out better when, you know, they're raised with a more strict. Now I'm not saying there are not some excesses back in Nigeria. In fact a lot of disciplinary measures parents take on their children would be counted as abuse here. I mean real major abuse, but um, you have some exceptions. But overall, overall, raising up a child there you're more strict. You're taught to really respect elders. Talking back is unheard of. Um, when I was growing up, teachers could spank you in school if you misbehave... I've never heard of time out. It's unheard of. You don't get time out. You get spanked. You get whooped if you misbehave. It was strict. It was stern. But I think ultimately the result is you have better behaved kids as opposed to here where, of course, um spanking is out of the question. Even as a parent if you spank...The child had a right to, you know, pick up the phone and, you know, call [Child Protective Services] or whoever they want to call... I feel here we have gone to the other extreme and been so lax and that's why you have children disrespecting their elders.¹⁶

Pastor Wumi's stereotype of African Americans as disrespectful is rooted in her child-rearing ideologies, which are culturally grounded. She believes that African Americans misconstrue their lack of stern discipline as—or equate it with—an act of liberty. Simply put, liberty is acting on free will through freedom of choice. So Pastor Wumi is suggesting that African American parents misinterpret their choice to not discipline their children strictly (according to her sense of the term) as allowing the children to have freedom. Based on Wumi's comments, her stereotype of the disrespectful African American is rooted in her belief that the latter are not disciplined strictly enough.

¹⁶ Wumi Ademola, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, November 8, 2015, transcript.

Tayo, Shina's wife, offers multiple understandings of this stereotype of African Americans as disrespectful. On the one hand, she believes that African Americans' disrespectfulness is inherently rooted in the language. She comments,

Africans, especially Nigerians, we are very respectful. Especially Yorubas. We are so respectful [that] we are respectful to a fault. It's annoying sometimes... We don't speak English to our older ones most of the times because English does not show respect. You say 'Hello' to a grown man. You say 'Hello' to a young boy.... Versus when you say, you know, 'Hello' to an elderly person in Yoruba you say 'Ekaaro.' That's showing respect. But to a younger person you say 'Kaaro.' The 'e' is what shows the respect. The 'e' is for older people. So we respect our elder ones to a fault. But with African Americans, um you know, a young boy can just come up to you and be like 'Hello.'"¹⁷

Tayo misperceives the word 'Hello' as disrespectful simply because it has no marker of difference for younger and elder people (such as the Yoruba prefix 'e' which Yorubas apply to a word to mark respect). Tayo is incorrect, however when she states that English language "does not show respect." There are many "honorifics" in the English language, such as the use of Mr., Mrs., Dr., or other words that recognize high status, or show politeness and respect, though it is not always mandatory in the English language to use them. For example, some professors in the United States might insist that you address them by their first name without the use of title. In other words, it is not necessarily the English language itself that encourages disrespect, instead such interpretation of disrespect is an outcome of the social conventions that dictate the use of the English language. Her confusion of language and decorum notwithstanding her assumption that African-Americans are disrespectful is a stereotype.

On the other hand, Tayo also suggests that Yoruba Nigerians' stereotype of African Americans as disrespectful is based on the former's lack of understanding and acceptance of cultural differences. She explains,

¹⁷ Omotayo Elegbede, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 5, 2015, transcript.

You can't blame the kids. It's just their culture. So you have to respect the culture. But then some people don't understand that...Some Africans don't understand that cultures are different. They want everybody to just be like them. So they see you and just say 'Oh, she doesn't have respect.' So it's just us understanding that you have to understand and respect other people's culture. Once you do that, you now realize that it's not like they're being disrespectful... It's just their culture.¹⁸

Tayo is suggesting that it is the African American's fault that we are stereotyped for being disrespectful. She implies that the misperception of certain African American behaviors as disrespect is often rooted in Nigerians' lack of understanding that the African-American culture is different. I recently experienced this misperception in my own home. It is expected in Yoruba culture for men and women to kneel (actually men are even expected to prostrate, but kneeling is more widely accepted now) in the presence of elders. I once forgot to kneel as I greeted my aunt-in-law during her visit to America. There was tension in the house for a few days. I asked what was bothering her. Rather than tell me, she reported me to my mother-in-law. I apologized and told her that I simply forgot and that this is not the culture I was born into. However, she was still convinced—she told me, in so many words—that it was not a culture-problem but my personal decision (not to kneel, that is) that was the problem.

The next frequent stereotype that emerged from my interviews is of the African American as criminal. Dickson, a Mechanical Engineer who has lived in the U.S. for about 5 years, even claimed that “[African Americans] are always doing crimes... Whenever you have neighborhoods with high rate of crime, it has to be an African American community.”¹⁹ On why he believes many African Americans are criminals, Demola, an accountant who moved to the U.S. with his family in 2015 explains: “When you live in the hood it's generally associated with crime... Because [African Americans] have a tendency to live in the hood the tendency to steal

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Dickson Adeyemo, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 17, 2015, transcript.

and be involved in crime is so high.”²⁰ The Bureau of Justice Statistics for 2008-2012 reveals that people living in poor households had a higher rate of violence (involving a firearm) compared to people who lived above the Federal Poverty Line (FPL).²¹ Nevertheless, none of the interviewees who held this stereotypical view ever mentioned that they have witnessed African Americans commit crimes. Therefore, the stereotype could be the result of the representation of crime in the media (I will discuss this later in the second chapter). Statistically, it is understandable why such stereotypes of African American criminality exist. A close examination of incarceration trends, particularly racial disparities in incarceration in the United States, reveals why criminal activity is often associated with African Americans. Marc Mauer’s article entitled “Addressing Racial Disparities in the United States” is a comprehensive overview of the current trends of mass incarceration in the United States and their impact on communities of color. He notes that “the FBI in its annual Uniform Crime Reports (categorized by race, but not ethnicity) reveals that African Americans constituted 30% of persons arrested for a property offense in 2009 and 39% of those arrested for a violent offense (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009),” which he felt was “clearly disproportionate to the 12% Black share of the overall national population.”²² In other words, there is a disparity between the African American population and their representation in the prison system.

The FBI’s annual Uniform Crime Reports for 2013 (the latest full report available) reveals that African Americans constituted 29 percent of persons arrested for property crimes

²⁰ Ademola Ige, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

²¹ Harell, Langton, Berzofsky, Couzens, and Smiley-McDonald, “Household Poverty and Nonfatal Violent Victimization, 2008-2012,” <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/hpnavv0812.pdf>.

²² Mauer, “Addressing Racial Disparities,” 89S.

and 38.7 percent of persons arrested for violent crimes.²³ These numbers are still likely disproportionate to the percentage of the African American population in 2013 since the African American population alone in 2010 was 12.6 percent and in 2014 was 13.2 percent.²⁴ These statistics seem to support the stereotype that African Americans are criminals because they represent a large percentage of arrests in America, yet only represent a small percentage of the overall United States population. This leads to a larger question of why there are disparities between the African American population, the amount of arrests they experience, and their representation in the prison system. Are there racial biases among police officers? Are officers disproportionately assigned to minority communities? These disparities are easily measured, but difficult to explain.

The third stereotype that emerged from my interviews is of the African American as uneducated. It is predicated on the belief that African Americans are either lazy, poor, or nonchalant. Dickson maintained that African Americans do not value education and tend to not go to school. He stated: "...[Nigerians] feel African Americans are lazy. That's the stereotype. One, they [African Americans] don't want to study and they don't want to work. You understand? And that's the reason why a white man is moving ahead... It's about discipline."²⁵ He added, "You see a lot of [African Americans] in jail because they are very lazy. They tend not to contribute to the society. They are the ones mostly on food stamps."²⁶ His comments about African Americans' laziness is stereotypical because many African Americans' lives have

²³ FBI, "Crime in the United States 2013," <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2013/crime-in-the-u.s.-2013/tables/table-43>.

²⁴ U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State & County Quick Facts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4835000.html> (accessed April 24, 2015).

²⁵ Dickson 16:41

²⁶ Dickson Adeyemo, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 17, 2015, transcript.

improved based on their academic achievement and social status within society. We've had an African American President for and Attorney General. This indicates that there are indeed African Americans who take advantage of educational opportunities, thereby countering such stereotypes of laziness.

Eyamba also explains why he believes African Americans are uneducated:

I think one that comes to mind is... I think the word is nonchalant... When I hear "African American"... I get "nonchalant..." On the positives I get, I see of course a people... who have had to struggle. But I won't lie to you. That is the older generation. That's how I see it. Like the older generation I always, like, salute because without them... I wouldn't be in my Fortune 500 company.... Because it pisses me off that I see, for example, in the south I see 30 years ago someone could not even go to college. Some people fought. Some people were ridiculed. Some people did something to provide you this platform and you're not using it.²⁷

Eyamba suggests that younger generations of African Americans are indifferent about education.

Yet he also posits that African Americans are indifferent about the struggles of an earlier generation that provided them the opportunity to receive an education. Eyamba's obvious frustration with what he perceives to be nonchalance from younger generations of African Americans, coupled with his attribution of his high status job to the struggles of older generations of African Americans, suggests that he believes Nigerians are less casual toward such educational and professional opportunities.

Bola, a mother of three currently working toward a degree in Professional Writing, disagreed with Eyamba's belief about African Americans' nonchalance toward education, saying: "It's not as if they don't want to read, but it's just the environment they find themselves is not conducive for them to read. And what promotes learning? Learning is done in school and at the same time at home."²⁸ Bola, in contrast to Eyamba, believes that African Americans

²⁷ Eyamba Ita, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

²⁸ Bolanle Babyemi, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 26, 2015, transcript.

actually want to learn, but do not live in environments which encourage them to do so. She explained how African Americans, despite living in the United States, still lack opportunity because they do not have the proper resources to succeed, such as books and teachers. She believes they tend to be uneducated due to poverty. She said: “It’s still based on poverty. If you look at the schools they go to it’s probably designed for them to fail. You don’t have good schools. You don’t have good libraries. You can’t really succeed...In an African American community, they will definitely fail if there are no books, if there are no good teachers to help them out.”²⁹ Whereas Dickson and Eyamba place blame on African Americans inherent choices, Bola suspects that it is outside forces beyond African Americans’ control which leaves them uneducated.

Another stereotype I found among my interlocutors is that African Americans lack their own mindset or a willingness to think for themselves. Kareem, also an engineer, states,

“The only thing I hold against them [African Americans] is that the fact that, you know, they tend to not have their own mindset. When I say mindset, they can easily be manipulated, which is something I still find highly, highly [surprising]. I went to a black school my entire life, all throughout my college years. I went to Texas Southern. I went to Prairie View. So I’ve never set foot in a white school. And it’s how quickly [African Americans] give up that top spot that baffles me.”³⁰

Kareem’s generalized judgement of African American behavior and thinking is based on his experiences attending two HBCU universities within the same geographic area (less than two hours apart). In 2015 there were 102 HBCUs in the United States³¹. An experience at only two universities (less than 2 percent) does not necessarily apply to all African Americans.

Nevertheless, Eyamba supports this idea and applies it to African Americans saying,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kareem Abioye, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

³¹ National Center for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts: Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=667>.

I do understand that there is a history and that history affects the way... African Americans think... But I feel like the mentality is that someone else always has to lead... I mean who says Prairie View can't be like Texas A&M? Who calls that shot? What makes that school, a black school, second-class or second rate to Texas A&M? And it's because you are not organized. You have not just decided to say "Well, we're going to do this, this, and this to ensure that we have penetration."³²

Eyamba has only lived in the United States for under two years. His comments that African Americans have a history relates to slavery and his misperception that African Americans do not see themselves as leaders, but rather followers. Eyamba on the other hand sees himself as a leader because he has never experienced a master-servant relationship as in slavery. He therefore believes he has his own mindset and can think for himself. While I know this to be true, he does not afford African Americans the same favorable opinion. Since slavery ended over a century ago, African Americans today also have not experienced slavery, yet Eyamba is describing a slave mentality in African Americans. Collectively African Americans are still regarded as having a slave mentality despite the fact that some African Americans are successful beyond such enclaves.

The fifth stereotype to emerge from the interviews is of the African American as irrational. For Demola and Dickson the term "akata," which Nigerians use for African Americans, captures the latter's irrational—and thus animal-like—tendencies. Demola explains, "[The term akata] is an animal. It's like likening somebody or likening a particular set of people to an animal because of their behavior."³³ Similarly Dickson explains:

[Nigerians] even have a name for [African Americans], funny enough, called an 'akata'. An akata is an animal who doesn't really understand... [Nigerians] look at them as irrational. [African Americans] can be nice to you today. Tomorrow they cannot be. It is someone who probably... someone people are, like, being bipolar. So you can't really

³² Eyamba Ita, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

³³ Ademola Ige, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

predict. So any slight thing an African American do, it's always a stereotype like 'Oh. He's akata. He's expected to do that, to behave that way.'³⁴

Dickson's description of an akata portrays African Americans as having animalistic qualities such as irrationality and bipolar tendencies. His comments broadly categorize African Americans as being uncivilized.

There were also a couple of less frequently used stereotypes during my interviews that are worth discussing. Kareem believed that African Americans have an individualistic mindset or attitude, as opposed to one of collectivity, that keeps them from rising to the top. He said, "... an African can step into a group of African Americans and come out running the show. (He repeated) An AFRICAN can step into a group of African Americans and come out running the show. And that baffles me a lot. And in some sense if you get what I'm getting to here is a [lack of a] sense of togetherness... among African Americans."³⁵ He made this comment immediately after his previous one about African Americans' lack of personal mindset to suggest a causal relationship between their individualistic attitudes (lack of togetherness) and their tendency to be easily manipulated. He goes on to describe his own experience with African American individualism,

In my engineering school, so we had a split of African Americans and other foreigners... And what happened was, at the internships we were getting scholarships and the African Americans weren't. And I kind of looked at the whole system and said... I saw a difference between us [the Africans], the Asians, and the African Americans. When you look at it from that perspective, when we get ready to study it's me and all those guys and we study together. When Asians study it's Wajid and Waheed and all those guys. They study together. When you go to the library and see African Americans, they sit by themselves. They study by themselves... When results come out you can see clearly. When we do exams you can see why we're just... It's something engraved in them from young that they think they have to be great all by themselves.³⁶

³⁴ Dickson Adeyemo, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 17, 2015, transcript.

³⁵ Kareem Abioye, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

³⁶ Kareem Abioye, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

For Kareem, togetherness is about helping one another and figuring things out as a group, rather than learning on one's own because one does not become great by individual effort, but through supportive networks. This is why he attributes the success (the attainment of scholarships) of the international students to togetherness (studying in groups) and African Americans' lack of success (the non-attainment of scholarships) to lack of togetherness (studying alone).

Pastor Wumi mentioned another stereotype of African Americans: "My daddy lived here [in the United States] and he saw the negative side of African American men, which unfortunately back then is this high rate of divorce, not being responsible, and stuff like that."³⁷ American society viewed African American men as not wanting to stay married (for whatever reason) and as irresponsible. When I asked Pastor Wumi about why American society viewed African American men as divorcees and irresponsible, she could not clarify.

Exception, Not Negation

Though negative stereotypes of African Americans seemed to dominate the conversations I had with my interviewees, some of the Yoruba Nigerians also indicated that there are exceptions to these stereotypes. After meeting African Americans who deviate from their perceptions of a "typical" African American, Yoruba Nigerians maintain that such African Americans are exceptions to, rather than the negations of, the stereotypes they already hold. Who qualified as an exception to these stereotypes? What made them qualified over other African Americans? Pastor Wumi told a story that offers some insight on these questions. She told about a time when the administration team of DIC was contemplating a reduction in the amount of African praise music done during the church services and an increase in that of contemporary gospel music in order to appeal to a larger international audience, a goal of the church evident in its title. It is in her

³⁷ Wumi Ademola, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, November 8, 2015, transcript.

explanation of why the administration team chose not to reduce the African praise music that she shows how the exception to these African American stereotypes is established.

Guess who was the first person to object to that [the reduction in African praise music]? It was an African American member in the choir. She said ‘No no no no no’... So it goes to show that I have encountered some African Americans that have tremendous respect for the African culture to the point that they identify with it and they love Africans. And I see in instances like that Africans in turn, when they encounter these kind of African Americans with this kind of attitudes, they are more open and warm to them because in their way they’re more like us.³⁸

Pastor Wumi suggests that some African Americans, as a result of respecting and adopting African culture, either in part or full, are exempt from the stereotypes often associated with their community.³⁹ This exemption is evident when, as Pastor Wumi describes, Africans are “more warm and open to them.” The implication here is that Africans are typically not warm and open to those African Americans who do not readily accept or adopt African culture. Pastor Wumi’s facial expression and excitement shows that Yoruba Nigerians make exceptions to their stereotypes of African Americans if the latter conform to African cultures. However, even when an African American “identifies” with an African culture, such as eating and cooking the foods, wearing traditional attire, and even developing an accent, it does not mean that he or she is seen as the opposite of the stereotypes associated with a “typical” African American discussed earlier. It does mean, however, that those stereotypes are not readily ascribed to him or her.

In my own experience, as an African American who has adopted many aspects of Nigerian culture, including food, language (though minimal), accent, Yoruba name

³⁸ Wumi Ademola, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, November 8, 2015, transcript.

³⁹ As a scholar, this term “African culture” makes me very uneasy because it tends to homogenize all Africans. It sounds like the references to Africa as though it were one country. I noticed that during many of the interviews, some Nigerians would refer to “an African culture.” I do not believe their intention is to present all African cultures as the same, but rather to express that there are some uniformities across various African cultures. My decision to use the phrase is purely to not misquote the speaker.

(Oluwanifemi, translated “God loves me”), traditional attire, and much more, I have experienced the warm welcome of Yoruba Nigerians who accept African Americans as part of their culture, even to the point of no longer referring to me as African American, but as “adopted Nigerian.” Though I humbly embrace their warm welcome, I am still perplexed by how much and what aspect of the culture must be adopted in order to be considered exceptions to such African American stereotypes. I also wonder if conformity to Yoruba Nigerian culture is the only way to gain “exceptional status” from being seen as a “typical” African American.

The interlocutors (and other Nigerians I have encountered in my life) who hold firm to the “exception, not negation” belief, ascribed to the subtyping model of stereotypes. Subtyping is the “process by which group members who disconfirm, or are at odds with, group stereotype are mentally clustered together.”⁴⁰ This model usually reveals how change in stereotypes is resisted rather than achieved because “the stereotypes will show little change if the perceivers are able to group together disconfirming members into a subtype and treat them as exceptions, unrepresentative of the group as a whole.”⁴¹ Though this model illuminates *how* my interlocutors have expressed their own beliefs about the “atypical” African Americans they encounter, it reveals nothing about *why* subtyping is preferable to changing or eliminating stereotypes held about a particular group. I agree with Schneider when he states, “Subtyping ought to promote perceptions of the larger group’s diversity.”⁴² In other words, encountering “exceptional” or “atypical” African Americans should lead my interlocutors to abandon, at least in part, the stereotypes they hold of African Americans and realize the diversity of that group. Yet this is not the case. The effect of my interlocutors’ subtyping seems to be their warmness and openness to

⁴⁰ Maurer et. al, “Subtyping,” 812.

⁴¹ Richards and Hewstone, “Subtyping,” 53.

⁴² Schneider, *The Psychology of Stereotyping*, 404.

“atypical” African Americans, rather than a change in or abandonment of the stereotype of African Americans.

Tayo shared her general experience of times when African Americans’ efforts to adopt Yoruba Nigerian culture may seem futile. She explains that there is a difference between the older and younger generation Nigerians in terms of acceptance of African Americans:

Most times when you say akata or when you say African American, most Nigerians, especially the older ones like the mommies, the daddies, the older ones that grew up in Nigeria, not like the ones who have been here for a long time... They have this picture about African Americans just like we had back home. So when you say akata, African Americans, they already picture you as, you know. There’s that... stereotype just placed on you until they get to know you. Even when they get to know you they still feel like mmmm they are all the same... So you as an African American... have to prove yourself to them. Like, no I’m African American, but no I’m different.⁴³

There seems to be less tolerance or ready acceptance of African Americans who show interest in conformance to Yoruba Nigerian culture among older Yoruba Nigerians who have only lived in the United States for a short period of time. Nevertheless, I am still not sure what constitutes a short period of time or how long one usually has to be in the United States to accept African Americans who conform to Yoruba Nigerian culture.

Comments on Reflexivity

Kareem seemed to be the only interlocutor who expressed reflexivity about the stereotypes he held of African Americans. He comments,

I was starting to form my own understanding. Well, is it the fact that [African Americans] really don’t like to go to school or the fact that, you know, a very small sample of people make a very large sample of good people actually look bad?... Funny enough I had some other African, Nigerian friends who actually were doing the same thing. Because they were kind of a lot more Americanized than I was at that time. They get financial aid. After financial aid closes, they drop the class.⁴⁴

⁴³ Omotayo Elegbede, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 5, 2015, transcript.

⁴⁴ Kareem Abioye, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

He questioned whether his view was true of all African Americans or even just African Americans alone and realized that disliking school or even abusing the school institution and financial aid did not only apply to African Americans (and in fact did not apply to all African Americans), but to some of his fellow Nigerians as well.

Comments on Laziness and Akata

Godfrey Mwakikagile discusses his own experience with Africans who hold similar views about African Americans as lazy which are in line with Dickson's comments: "[Africans] also see [African Americans] as 'lazy' and 'prone to crime' instead of doing something constructive with their lives... in [the United States] which has so many opportunities almost for anybody to succeed in life as long as one is willing to sacrifice and work hard."⁴⁵ Mwakikagile's comments reveals that some Africans believe that African Americans would prefer laziness over success and that African Americans' laziness is not nurtured by lack of opportunities since there are many opportunities to succeed in America. Based on my own encounters with term akata and discussions with Nigerians, I understand an akata to be an embodiment of the stereotypes discussed in this chapter. There are varying opinions about the exact meaning of an akata. However, many of the explanations seemed to define akata negatively, as opposed to positively or neutral, as is reflected in my interviews with Yoruba Nigerians as well.

I am not the first scholar to discuss the term akata in academia. Mwakikagile comments:

What is Akata? In Yoruba language of southwest Nigeria where it originated, it meant black Americans of African descent... However, the Africans in the Diaspora have turned the term to mean something more negative or derogative. They have used it derogatorily to imply all the symptoms embodied in negativity such as lethargic, penury, unmotivated, kleptomania, drug head, welfare queen, drunkard, uneducated, killers, broken homes, illiterates and rapists.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Mwakikagile, *Relations between Africans*, 279.

⁴⁶ Mwakikagile, *Relations Between Africans*, 282.

Mwakikagile's suggests that a Nigerians' understanding of akata has changed based on his or her travel outside of Nigeria. Interestingly, he does not attempt to explain why the term became associated with negative stereotypes about African Americans after Nigerians have traveled abroad. Insaadoo and Insaadoo interviewed multiple Nigerians who expressed their own understanding of the term akata as well. Their understandings of the term are similar to Pastor Wumi's and Mwakikagile's. Their first interviewee was Khalid from Kano in Nigeria who had been living in the United States for over 35 years at the time of the interview. When asked why Nigerians call African Americans akata, he responded,

Some Africans use the term loosely to refer to all black Americans, but it does not refer to all of them... the word akata refers to some black women who are unstable and unreliable... A young woman who smokes profusely, drinks hard liquor, uses all kinds of drugs, and follows all kinds of men indiscriminately... Her life is not stable because she may not have steady employment and continually follows criminals in the street.⁴⁷

Khalid only uses the term akata to refer to an African American woman with qualities of alcoholism, drug addiction, possible unemployment, promiscuity, and association with criminals. There is a similar term in the Yoruba language, "akada", which is a more gendered, yet still stereotypical, term. Nevertheless, these are many of the same qualities we saw earlier in Mwakikagile's comments about Africans repurposing the term to refer to what he calls "drug heads," "welfare queens," and drunkards. Khalid's view of African American women as unstable is similar to Dickson's comments about African Americans as bipolar, as this disorder is associated with an unstable personality.

Insaadoo and Insaadoo also interviewed Clement, an Igbo-Nigerian who had lived in America for more than ten years at the time of the interview. His views on the term akata counter the negative stereotypes we have seen thus far: "The term akata [is] used to describe black

⁴⁷ Insaadoo and Insaadoo, *The African Meets*, 137.

Americans by Nigerians, it is not an abusive word; neither is it an insult... It is used to denote that blacks have their own cultural mode of behavior, which is entirely different from the African.”⁴⁸ Clement does not state how Africans’ and African Americans’ behaviors are different, or if the differences are positive or negative in his view. He simply uses the term to establish that there are cultural differences between Africans and African Americans, but not to refer to the nature of those cultural differences. None of the definitions discussed provide insight into how the term was chosen from the Yoruba language. What is the Yoruba etymology of the term ‘akata’? How did that root meaning become associated with an African American? These are questions that my interlocutors and many scholars, including me, have not been able to answer. Nevertheless, ‘akata’ is generally a loaded term which references identity, blackness, and difference, while at the same time a slur that embodies stereotypical views about those references.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 152.

CHAPTER III: VISIT THE FOUNDATION

“A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is the projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position, and our own rights. The stereotypes are... highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them.”

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 96

In this chapter I focus on the roots of the stereotypes that Nigerians have of African Americans, discussing four main factors that contribute to the construction of such stereotypes. These are media representation, personal encounters, hearsay, and differences in perception of opportunity in the United States.

Mass Media and Stereotype Formation

The mass media is a perfect channel for both the production and reproduction of stereotypes “because they extend throughout society, and frequently serve as trend-setters, taste-makers, labelers, and the raw material for daily conversation.”⁴⁹ How people make sense of African American identity is affected by the process of “media priming.” Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Carpentier define media priming as “the effects of the content of media on people’s later behavior or judgments related to the content.”⁵⁰ Hilton and von Hippel contend, “The way we process information, even unambiguous information, is heavily influenced by information that we have previously encountered,”⁵¹ such as what people view in the media. Whether or not a person is aware of such media priming, does not mean that the priming has no effect on the viewer. In fact, “the influence of priming is not limited to conscious information processing” because priming can occur even when it “takes place outside conscious awareness.”⁵² Studies have shown that priming effects include perceptions and evaluations of

⁴⁹ Brown, Firestone, and Mickiewicz, *Television/Radio*, 8.

⁵⁰ Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Dillman Carpentier, “Media Priming,” 97.

⁵¹ Hilton and von Hippel, “Stereotypes,” 248.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 249.

other-group members and behavior toward the individuals being portrayed on television.⁵³ One important aspect of priming includes how people juxtapose images of racialized individuals with a news story to form implicit links between the racialized individuals and negative issues or concerns. In a study of the evening news on four Chicago television stations, Robert Entman found that “a major reason for the comparatively negative imagery of blacks is that they are reported more frequently in connection with violence.”⁵⁴ The key word here is ‘reported’ because it refers to what news commentators say about the images they show on television. Sometimes what is said is based on speculation before the reporters fully know the facts. Abraham and Appiah coined the term implicit visual propositioning that they define as “the use of visual images... juxtaposed with the explicit verbal statements to make a comment, proposition or suggest new meanings that go beyond the meanings simply produced through the written or verbal narrative.”⁵⁵ Their perspective highlights the process of activating and priming stereotypes. The implication of their research is that news stories with images of African Americans aids in the priming of African American stereotypes.

Many researchers have shown how that the media is more likely to portray negative news about minorities. In a study on local television news programming in Los Angeles and Orange Counties, Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz found that African Americans and Latinos were significantly more likely than whites to be portrayed as lawbreakers or perpetrators than as

⁵³ See Devine, “Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their Automatic and Controlled Components,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56 (1989): 5-18.; Dixon, “Psychological Reactions to Crime News Portrayals of Black Criminals: Understanding the Moderating Roles of Prior News Viewing and Stereotype Endorsement,” *Communication Monographs* 73, no. 2 (2006): 162-87.; and Power, Murphy, and Coover, “Priming Prejudice: How Stereotypes and Counter-Stereotypes Influence Attribution of Responsibility and Credibility among In-groups and Outgroups,” *Human Communication Research* 23, no. 1 (September 1996): 36-58.

⁵⁴ Entman, “Blacks in the News,” 355.

⁵⁵ Abraham and Appiah, “Framing New Stories,” 185.

victims, whereas the opposite was true for whites. They are not the only ones to conclude that minorities are more likely to be viewed as criminal, dangerous, violent, threatening, and so forth.⁵⁶ Mary Beth Oliver argues that the ways in which news media depict race and crime, “and viewers’ responses to such portrayals, play important roles in creating and sustaining the stereotype of black men as ‘criminal’ and ‘dangerous’.”⁵⁷ In general, the body of research on the negative portrayal of African Americans in news coverage reveals that African Americans (and other minorities, in some studies) are often more likely to be associated with criminality and that the images that accompany these depictions often suggest that African Americans are particularly threatening.

The media’s portrayal of African Americans is so important because the media is often the only source of information about African Americans in countries outside the United States.⁵⁸ A group of communication scholars researching African American stereotypes in South Korea argued that “when opportunities for direct contact are lacking, the media serve as important agents in the formation of stereotypes.”⁵⁹ They posited, “In many foreign countries, where

⁵⁶ For more sources which discuss the negative portrayal of African Americans by American media see: Entman, “Representation and Reality in the Portrayal of Blacks on Network Television News,” *Journalism Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1994): 509-20., and Greenberg, Mastro, and Brand, “Minorities and the Mass Media: Television into the 21st Century,” In *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. 2nd ed. Edited by Jennings Bryant and Mary Beth Oliver. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.

⁵⁷ Oliver, “African American Men,” 4.

⁵⁸ There is very little research on African (and particularly Nigerian) perceptions of African Americans in the news media.

⁵⁹ Tan et. al., “A Cognitive Processing Model,” 571. For more sources which support how the media serves as a major source of stereotype formation see: Appiah, “Black and White Viewers’ Perception and Recall of Occupational Characters on Television.” *Journal of Communication* 52, no. 4 (2002): 776-93; Dixon, “Psychological Reactions to Crime News Portrayals of Black Criminals: Understanding the Moderating Roles of Prior News Viewing and Stereotype Endorsement,” *Communication Monographs* 73, no. 2 (2006): 162-87.; Dixon, “Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime,” *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008): 106-25.;

personal contact with Americans is infrequent, the media play a powerful role in influencing stereotypes of Americans.”⁶⁰ Their research highlights how influential media priming can be on people’s perceptions of African Americans.

All of my interlocutors, having no prior contact with African Americans before coming to the United States, told me how the media influenced their beliefs about African Americans. Tunji, Shina’s younger brother, described what shaped his own belief about African Americans saying: “The media portrays that they don’t want to go to school, that they’re criminal... Like they cannot actually organize themselves.”⁶¹ On why he views African Americans as nonchalant, Eyamba said, “When I hear African American, and of course that’s predominantly driven by the image that, you know, I see in the media and my experience and things I see as well, I get [from the media] nonchalant. Keep in mind that I’m talking about this is what I used to see back home before I came [to the U.S.]”⁶² Dickson added, “Nigerians come in [to America] having a mindset about African Americans because what the media ... portrays about African Americans is not who they are. [Nigerians] see [African Americas] more as being at the lower end of the society... I believe it’s the media.” Dickson blamed the media for such “brainwashing” and informed me that it was not until after he came to the United States and experienced many encounters with different African Americans that he came to such realization. He suggests that it

Fujioka, “Television Portrayals and African-American Stereotypes: Examination of Television Effects When Direct Contact is Lacking.” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1999): 52-74.; Oliver, “Caucasian Viewers’ Memory of Black and White Criminal Suspects in the News,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 3 (1999): 46-60.; and Rada, “A New Piece of the Puzzle: Examining Effects of Television Portrayals of African Americans,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 44, no. 4 (2000): 704-15.

⁶⁰ Tan et. al., “A Cognitive Processing Model,” 572. See also: Tan, et al., “Stereotypes of African-Americans and Media Use among Chinese High School Students,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20, no. 3 (2009): 260-75.

⁶¹ Adetunji Elegbede, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 12, 2015, transcript.

⁶² Eyamba Ita, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

is not in meeting African Americans that Africans tend to dislike or stereotype them, but that it begins before they even meet. The stereotyping begins in the Africans' own countries and in their own homes, watching media portrayals of African Americans. In line with my earlier discussion of how the media is very influential in shaping perceptions, the media [formed and]? encouraged Dickson and Tunji's stereotypical views of African Americans by serving as a major informant for their understanding of African American identity. In other words, they were "primed". Dickson and Tunji's reflexivity of understanding the source of their stereotypes presents a paradox; on the one hand they know they've been primed, yet on the other hand they still seem to hold these stereotypes.

Positive images of African Americans also surfaced during the interviews. In fact, Pastor Wumi's comments differed from the comments of the younger Yoruba Nigerians I interviewed in that she saw African Americans largely in a positive view when she was growing up in Nigeria, i.e., prior to her return to the U.S. She comments,

I can speak for when I was growing up, [African Americans] were portrayed pretty good. In fact, the biases, the biases that Africans have toward African Americans, I think it happens when [Africans] come here [to the United States]. Because we [Nigerians] actually envy African Americans, at least when I was growing up [in Nigeria]. You know, we have, um, magazines like Ebony, um Jet, and which of course project the best of the best of African Americans. That was my image of African Americans.⁶³

Unlike the younger Yoruba Nigerian interlocutors, Pastor Wumi had a mostly positive view of African Americans while in Nigeria and upon her entrance to the United States (I say mostly because at some point her father influenced her to think differently). Pastor Wumi continued:

I was so impressed with the way African Americans looked. I thought their skin looked good. Before then I didn't know about weave on. I thought that was their actual hair. So I began to envy and want to be like them. I began to want to get all the products that they advertise in Jet and Ebony. And so great was my fascination that one day I mentioned to

⁶³ Wumi Ademola, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, November 8, 2015, transcript.

my dad that, “You know what dad? I won’t even mind marrying an African American man.”⁶⁴

Her beliefs resonated with what Yekutiel Gershoni describes as the “African-American myth.” Gershoni draws from Mark Schorer’s sense of myth as “a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience.”⁶⁵ Gershoni explains that Africans’ increasing frustration with the limitations of colonial rule eventually lead to the African American myth because they looked to America for possible solutions to the cultural, social, and political dilemmas they faced.⁶⁶ He states, “In their search [for solutions], many of them mythologized the black American experience, idealizing black Americans’ accomplishments and well-being, downplaying their miseries, and creating... the African-American myth.”⁶⁷ Wumi’s idealization of African American beauty shaped how she interpreted her own beauty and her understanding of African Americans as people to be envied, rather than to be skeptical of or kept safe from. This was the first and only instance in which one of my interlocutors mentioned wanting to be *like* an African American.

Personal Experience Influences Stereotypes

A couple of interlocutors also expressed how their experiences either helped them form new stereotypes or reinforce old ones. Tunji gave an example of his experience while living in a Chicago neighborhood: “It’s a really black neighborhood... Our home was broken into three times and they were done by our neighbors who are blacks. My nephew, on his way home from school, was lynched and they took his money, his cell phone from him... Lynch means a group of people just attacked you and just try to get everything you have.”⁶⁸ Tunji’s description of crime

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Schorer, “the Necessity of Myth,” 355.

⁶⁶ Gershoni, Africans on African-Americans, 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Adetunji Elegbede, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 12, 2015, transcript.

by African Americans reveals why he chose to continue to believe the stereotype of African Americans as criminals. As I discussed in the earlier section of this chapter, he was initially influenced by the media to view African Americans as criminals, but either experiencing himself or knowing someone who experienced victimization by African American criminals only affirmed the stereotype.

Tobi gave an example of an encounter that helps to explain why she believes the stereotype that African Americans are uneducated:

Somebody completing high school is seen [by African Americans] as if he has actually achieved something great... So [African Americans] don't even think of going to the college or the university.⁶⁹

Tobi's sentiments about African Americans seeing high school graduation as something great reminds me of my own experiences attending a predominantly African American high school in Houston. Then (and even now) it was a crowning achievement for African Americans to earn a high school diploma considering that the school was in Third Ward (an area known for its high crime and poverty rates). Many of the students who attended my high school lived in the same area (some only blocks away from the school). For many of my fellow high school graduates, earning a diploma while overcoming the odds of being killed in a high crime neighborhood was a great success. It is just unfortunate, as Tobi states, that many of them did not aspire to attend college.

Hearsay and Stereotypes

Some of my interlocutors also shared that some of their views of African Americans derive from the influence of others who travelled to the United States or abroad and encountered African

⁶⁹ Oluwatobi Ogundiya, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

Americans. The interlocutors explained how some of the stereotypes they formed about African Americans were a result of hearing others share their experiences. Pastor Wumi tells of how she was influenced to think about the negative side of African Americans:

I was so impressed with the way African Americans looked. And so great was my fascination that one day I mentioned to my dad that, “You know what dad? I won’t even mind marrying an African American man. And my daddy, he having lived [in the U.S.]... Unfortunately he knew the realities of the stereotypes of a majority of African American men. And my daddy said, “No, you’re not going to marry an African American.” I said, “Why? No, I want to marry one because I see the guys in *Ebony*. I see the guys in *Jet*. They look all together... He says, “No no no no no.” And my daddy, I think that kind of scared him. He said something. He said I’m not going to go back to America to study until I get married. And so that was why I never came back to America until after I married. So he made sure I got married to a Nigerian guy. And so that goes to tell you that at home [in Nigeria] we have a flawless picture, at least growing up. But because my daddy lived here [in the United States] and he saw the negative side of African American men.⁷⁰

So, although Pastor Wumi’s initial view of African Americans, when she was growing up in Nigeria, was a positive view of African Americans, discussion with her father, who lived in the United States for a few years studying for his Ph.D. and was obviously old enough to remember what he saw, introduced her to negative perceptions about African Americans. The father’s fear of his daughter marrying an African American man, to the extent of taking cautious measures to ensure she does not do so, shows how deeply stereotypes about African Americans can become embedded in Nigerians’ consciousness and how strongly those who believe in such stereotypes can react to them.

Kareem also talked about others’ influence on his beliefs about African Americans:

So what [African Americans] used to be when I first got here was shaped by [school mates]... I went to Texas Southern my first two or three years. So being at Texas Southern... I hear, oh, [African Americans] don’t really like to go to school and other kind of things. I kind of, well, saw that to an *extent*. ... Off of the stereotypes which I was

⁷⁰ Wumi Ademola, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, November 8. 2015, transcript.

gaining from other people, then, was like they were giving the impression that *all* African Americans did that. Like they were taking life too unserious.⁷¹

Though he was initially influenced by others' negative comments about African Americans, his prolonged direct contact with African Americans changed his views about the stereotypes, helping him to realize that not all African Americans fit into those stereotypical roles.

Perception of Opportunity in the U.S.

Another factor that shapes Yoruba Nigerian constructs of African Americans is the difference in how both groups view opportunity. In studying social distance and differential acculturation of Africans and African Americans, Paul-Albert Emoungu concludes that, "Oppositional [i.e. African against African American] perceptions of the American opportunity structure appear to impact upon each group's social adaptation pattern."⁷² By "American opportunity structure," Emoungu is referring to access to opportunity that privileges whites over other racialized groups. According to Emoungu, Africans and African Americans different perceptions of opportunity within America, impacts their intergroup relations. He goes on further to explain the differences in this perception of the American opportunity structure:

The black American generally perceives the structure of opportunity in the United States as a mirage hidden by a thick veil of white racism and oppression, and the elimination of the latter appears to be the necessary condition for blacks' taking advantage of the former. African immigrants do not appear to impose this condition upon their host country. Any obstacles and inequities they encounter are perceived as the costs of opportunity, the price of 'making it' in America.⁷³

Africans view obstacles or inequalities as a necessary or inherent condition for working toward access to opportunity, without necessarily having to eliminate white racism in order to do so. The implication here is that both Africans and African Americans see inequalities as obstacles, yet

⁷¹ Kareem Abioye, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 3, 2015, transcript.

⁷² Emoungu, "Africans and Black Americans," 78.

⁷³ Ibid.

differ in opinion about how to overcome those obstacles. Because Africans immigrate to the U.S., they believe they must work harder than white Americans in order to achieve success. On the other hand, African Americans believe they should only have to work equally as hard as white Americans in order to achieve the same level of success. Dickson's views compare with Emoungu's statement, yet Dickson offers more on the matter:

The opportunities in the U.S. the way Africans view it is like "These are very very great opportunities that you won't find somewhere else. But an African American doesn't see it that way. He probably sees it like, "Oh, I'm still being cheated. I probably should have been offered more... But an immigrant, an African sees it like oh it's the best because where they are coming from, there's nothing called opportunity... It doesn't even exist... They look at it from the godly perspective. That's what makes them believe that it is possible irrespective of the barriers...I can actually try irrespective of what is going on... Whether there is racism there or there is no racism, as long as there's one person there who is my skin color, then it's possible for me to do it. Even if there is no one there, it is actually religion in some cases that actually push them to do what they want to do... This is where the difference is. African Americans feel they have to overcome racism. He believes he's equal as a white man because they are both citizens. A Nigerian approaches as "Oh, I'm a lesser person because I'm not born here. I'm not a citizen so I have to struggle for it." It's not my birthright. An African American sees it as a birthright. They believe [blacks and whites] should all start on an equal level ground, where it's not actually like that.⁷⁴

Dickson suggests that Africans are more grateful for opportunities in the United States because they were not born in a country with such opportunities. In contrast, he also suggests that African Americans believe they deserve the opportunities because they are American citizens just like some whites. Dickson agrees with Emoungu that African Americans feel they must overcome racism because they feel they are equal to whites, that it is their birthright to have opportunities without racism just as it is a white person's. Yet Dickson feels because African immigrants were not born here, they must struggle to overcome racism to achieve opportunities without necessarily having to eliminate it.

⁷⁴ Dickson Adeyemo, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 17, 2015, transcript.

CHAPTER IV: ON ECONOMICS

“The abandonment of all stereotypes for a wholly innocent approach to experience would impoverish human life. What matters is the character of the stereotypes and the gullibility with which we employ them.”

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p. 90

In this chapter, I suggest that Nigerians and African Americans are in competition with each other for economic status, specifically in Houston, Texas. I point out that stereotypes create and perpetuate a distinction between Nigerians and African Americans in the labor market that, while it economically advantages Nigerians, has disadvantageous consequences for African Americans.

Stereotypes for Social Mobility

Research on the labor market experiences of migrant vis-à-vis native-born minority groups observed economic competition and uneven opportunities between them. Some of this research observes that African Americans are particularly disadvantaged in the competition. In his study of seven occupational and thirty-two industrial categories Franklin Wilson found that a “high immigrant share of the workforce in an employment sector was associated with joblessness for African Americans and Latinos” and “greater joblessness for African Americans” between 1980 and 1990.⁷⁵ Are Africans (particularly Yoruba Nigerians and especially in Houston) in a similar economic competition with African Americans on the labor market? One reason worth asking this question is that Nigerians represent the largest black other that African Americans are likely to encounter in Houston.⁷⁶ Texas has the third largest distribution of foreign-born population from Africa after New York and California.⁷⁷ Of that foreign-born population, 56,000

⁷⁵ Wilson, “Ethnic Concentrations,” 17.

⁷⁶ Migration Policy Institute, “U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County, 2009-2013,” <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county> (accessed April 24, 2015).

⁷⁷ Gambino, Trevelyan, and Fitzwater, “The Foreign-Born Population from Africa: 2008-2012,” U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed April 24, 2015.

are from West Africa.⁷⁸ Nigerians make up 42,000 of that number.⁷⁹ 17,400 West Africans live in Harris County, by far the largest county in Houston.⁸⁰ Nigerians make up 13,600 of the West Africans living in Harris County.⁸¹

The fact that Nigerians are the largest black other than African Americans are likely to encounter is especially true of the Southwest Houston area. While there is no statistical data to support this claim, Nigerians' own reference to Southwest Houston as "Nigerian Central" speaks to the large Nigerian population in that area. The tendency towards the homogenization of blacks in America can obscure intra-racial competition that the presence of West Africans and especially the large share of Nigerians in Houston might present. For instance the United States' official census figures indicate that in 2010 blacks or African Americans represented 23.7 percent of the total population in Houston.⁸² This percentage includes people who would self-identify as Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian as well. Yet, there is no separate option on the data forms for Africans, specifically the African migrant, to list his or her region or country of origin. This is also true for migrant black people from places other than Africa. Even if a person puts their specific country of origin under the option labeled "Other," he or she is still included in the "Black or African American" option. Similarly, the statistical data does not show the percentage of African Americans, i.e., not including other black groups. This notwithstanding, statistics such as by-state-and-county data provided by the Migration Policy Institute, indicate the distinctive

⁷⁸ According to the United States Census Bureau of all the regions of Africa (Northern, Western, Southern, Central, and Eastern), West Africa represents the largest population in Texas.

⁷⁹ Migration Policy Institute, "U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County. 2009-2013," <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county> (accessed April 24, 2015).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² U.S. Bureau of the Census, "State & County Quick Facts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48/4835000.html> (accessed April 24, 2015).

presence of West Africans (especially Nigerians) and makes pertinent the question of economic competition between these Nigerians and the African American population in the city.

Demola, one of my interlocutors, suggested that African migrants derive an advantage on the labor market from their participation in immigrant networks and that African Americans are disadvantaged because of their lack of participation in similar networks. He said

Africans generally... Immigrants, because they are very few, the only way [to get jobs] is to actually help one another get into the jobs or help one another overcome obstacles. If you overcome it, what do you do? You just help your fellow brother... In Africa, you don't see race. What you see is that you are from one continent or that you are from one country. And so the best way out is for you to just actually help [other Africans] because [with] unity you'll be able to fight ahead and move ahead... But an African American mostly... look at things as if it's a personal achievement. But if you are in a strange land, nobody cares about personal achievement. They see you as a group of Africans, compared to African Americans... [who] look at individuals.⁸³

Demola's observation is consistent with some of the research on immigration and the labor market. Some of the advantages of immigrants in the labor market are attributed to their network. Roger Waldinger conducted a series of interviews with managers and owners of over 200 businesses in Los Angeles, California in 1993 and 1994 and found that for entry-level jobs these managers and owners primarily used network-driven referrals for hiring from the Mexican and Central American workforce. He argued that, "such networks are beneficial to immigrants, but are often exclusionary to African Americans and others outside the group."⁸⁴ Mary C. Waters examined the workplace dynamics of a large corporate cafeteria and also found that in this workplace, once mostly African American but later dominated by West Indians, network hiring gave immigrants greater job accessibility.⁸⁵ Consistent with Roger Waldinger and Mary Waters findings, Demola

⁸³ Ademola Ige, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

⁸⁴ Bean and Bell-Rose, "Introduction," 19.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

sees networking as crucial for immigrants because it creates a sense of unity in a foreign land, which helps them to forge ahead.⁸⁶

Whereas Demola identifies immigrant networking as the factor that advantages Nigerians over African Americans on the labor market Tobi, another of my interlocutors and a former Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) in Chicago, described what he felt was the disadvantage of African Americans' workplace attitude in the labor market competition. Tobi maintained that,

“African Americans are lazy and they call off [from work] a lot and so it gives Nigerians the opportunity to compete better. Employers equally believe that stereotype that African Americans are generally less hard working than immigrants because they [the employers] see the way they [African Americans] act. Even Nigerians are willing to do overtime, but you don't see African Americans doing that.”⁸⁷

In Mary Waters' examination of the workplace dynamics of the large corporate cafeteria she found that changes in the workplace, when West Indians replaced African Americans as the dominant workforce, were cultural as opposed to structural. She attributed this to how West Indians' negative perceptions of African Americans mirrored those of their white bosses and, “contributed to workplace tension among native-born and immigrant workers.”

Tobi believes just like the correspondence between the West Indians and their white bosses' perceptions of African Americans, his own stereotypes of African Americans are likely to be consistent with the views of employers in a way that advantages him as a Nigerian immigrant. In other words, not only is there a stereotype-driven dichotomy between the two groups but also that dichotomy gives Nigerians advantage in the competition for economic opportunity in the

⁸⁶ For another source which discuss these topics see: Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?: African-Americans and New Immigrants in Post Industrial New York*, United States: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1996.

⁸⁷ Oluwatobi Ogundiya, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, October 31, 2015, transcript.

labor market because they make African Americans less appealing to employers on the labor market.

Tunji, another interlocutor, also observes that Nigerians' stereotypes of African Americans have the utility of giving the former advantages over the latter in the competitive labor marketplace. Tunji suggested that the stereotypes

are useful because it helps an African opportunity to actually compete. If there is no stereotype, everything looks normal and probably your chances become slimmer. But because there's a stereotype of African Americans, it actually push [Africans] a bit out of the pack... [Africans and African Americans] are not bunched up together. So you're actually a bit separated... So that stereotype actually helps you to compete and so you want to actually prove yourself that you are better off than an African American.⁸⁸

Tunji brings to mind Anita Gonzalez's theory of social navigation, which explains how certain groups in America have climbed the ladder of social mobility on the basis of perceptions about African American's identity. Gonzalez argues that "black performance" is "part of an ongoing and evolving dialogue with other ethnicities for economic and social status" in which non-black performers used blackness to negotiate their own status within their society:⁸⁹ She describes how transplanted Irishmen (Irishmen who immigrated to another country) used minstrelsy (or blackface) to differentiate themselves from their African and Caribbean counterparts. She also describes how Chontal Native Americans, at the time of her study, performed examples of black (or Negrito) rebellions in order to "socially navigate". Non-black performers used their self-distancing from blackness as a way to attain, or at least come close to whiteness. For them, black identity had utility as cultural collateral for social and economic competition. They associated black "others" with negative traits in order to elevate themselves above those "others."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Adetunji Elegbede, interview by Breigha Adeyemo, September 12, 2015, transcript.

⁸⁹ Gonzalez, "Navigations," 20.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

It appears from Tobi and Tunji's statements that Nigerians have become part of a long history of "social navigation" that Gonzalez in America that Gonzalez talks about—a history in which one ethnic group establishes a difference between itself and another in a way that allows the former to achieve economic gains. If Tobi and Tunji's statements are anything to go by, the use of others' identity for upward social mobility is something that occurs in everyday life as well—it is not confined within the scope of the staged performances that Gonzalez studies.

Tobi and Tunji's observations also indicate, beyond the inter-racial character of Gonzalez's competing groups, that the competition for social mobility that drives social navigation occurs also *within* the black community. Not only do non-black bodies use black bodies to negotiate social status, but black bodies also use other black bodies to do so as well. African and African American identities are often homogenized by other racial groups, which may produce a false sense of solidarity between these two groups and obscure intraracial tensions. These groups have a history of forging bonds with one another in America. However, African immigrants and African Americans are not necessarily readily accepting of one another simply because both groups are of the same race or have an ancestral connection. As Marilyn Halter and Violet Showers Johnson suggest, "to presume that long-standing African Americans whose ancestry may well date back to seventeenth-century America, should automatically embrace, for example, Ghanaian arrivals of the twenty-first century just because both originally hailed from the African continent is rather illogical."⁹¹ There is a vast amount of scholarship that acknowledges such heterogeneity and challenges others to do so as well,⁹² especially with the

⁹¹ Halter and Showers Johnson, *African and American*, 182-183.

⁹² For more information on scholars who challenge the positioning of Black immigrants as the same as African Americans see: George Mwangi, "Complicating Blackness: Black Immigrants and Racial Positioning in U.S. Higher Education," *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 3, no.2 (2014): Article 3.

relatively new interest in what scholars are terming “The New African Americans.”⁹³ Tobi and Tunji never state categorically that Nigerians consciously use the stereotypes to help themselves economically—what they point out is that the mere existence of the stereotype helps them to get jobs. Thus while Nigerians might not consciously use stereotypes for economic gain he or she benefits economically from the competitive advantage over African Americans when those stereotypes differentiate the two groups by marking African Americans as the less employable other.

⁹³ For more information on the “New African Americans” see Showers, “What, Then, Is the African American?” *African and Afro-Caribbean Identities in Black America*, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28, no.1 (2008): 77-103; Halter and Johnson, *African and American: West Africans in Post-Civil Rights America*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2014; and Okpewho and Nzegwu, *The New African Diaspora*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

The overarching theoretical framework for my thesis is that stereotypes are used as performative markers of difference for Yoruba Nigerians to differentiate themselves from African Americans. In chapter one I discussed various theories about stereotypes as well as the particular stereotypes that my interlocutors expressed about African Americans. These stereotypes mark African Americans as disrespectful, criminal, uneducated, irrational, individualistic, and irresponsible. I want to stress here that the stereotypes found in my interviews do not remain static and can change over time and from generation to generation. As I mentioned previously, my interlocutors were the first Yoruba Nigerians in their families to settle in the U.S. I also showed that some Yoruba Nigerians consider some African Americans to be exceptions to the stereotypes that the former hold about the latter. However, these ‘atypical’ African Americans are considered as merely the exceptions to and not the negations of the stereotypes. In chapter two I presented the various influences on Yoruba Nigerians’ stereotypes of African Americans. I identified the media as a major influence on Yoruba Nigerians’ understanding of African Americans prior to the former’s arrival in the United States. Other influences I identified include Yoruba Nigerians’ personal encounters with African Americans, their exposure to others’ opinions about African Americans, as well as their perceptions of opportunities in America. In chapter three I analyzed the connection between stereotypes and inter-group competition in America, by explaining that stereotypes can be used for economic gain.

I noticed that there is an undeniable paradox in the statements of my interlocutors. Some of them, on one hand, seem to be aware that the views they hold about African Americans are stereotypes and that they have been “primed” (by media and so forth) to hold such stereotypes. Despite their awareness of this, they still discuss these stereotypes as if they were truly

representative of African Americans. Halter and Showers Johnson observe that “the history of the relationship between native and foreign-born blacks in the United States has often been an uneasy one, filled with ambivalence on both sides.”⁹⁴ Such ambivalence on the foreign-born blacks’ side may have much to do with the intricacies of navigating, expressing, and conveying their own unique immigrant and cultural identity in the United States. As Halter and Showers Johnson point out, “some West Africans resist the label of ‘black’ because, among other things, they see it as eclipsing their unique cultural identities and, furthermore, they arrived with preconceived pejorative ideas about this population that can manifest itself as disdain or arrogance toward them.”⁹⁵ Continuing to perpetuate African American stereotypes may be a way, though a very misguided one, for Yoruba Nigerian immigrants to preserve their own cultural identities in the United States, where they are often homogenized under the umbrella terms “black” or “African American”. This raises the question: how can Nigerian immigrants preserve their own cultural identities without the use of African American stereotypes to assert difference?

Stereotype formation is in large part about helping people make sense of others. In other words, stereotypes are “used to explain and predict the behavior of members of a socially defined group.”⁹⁶ My findings suggest that relationships between Yoruba Nigerians and African Americans are still very scarred. My interlocutors’ statements and observations suggest that, for the most part, they act in response to their own predictions of African American behavior, regardless of whether or not the African Americans they encounter conform to such stereotypes. I suggest that future interviews and ethnographic research should address other communities

⁹⁴ Halter and Sowers Johnson, *African and American*, 181-182.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 183.

⁹⁶ Stephan and Rosenfield, “Racial and Ethnic Stereotypes,” 92.

across the nation with large African and Nigerian populations. Such research might consider variables like age, gender, and class in their analyses of the Nigerian and African American relationship.

Throughout my research and writing I was constantly drawn to Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk on the dangers of a single story.

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature... So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become... All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. I've always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person... The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar... That when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.⁹⁷

When we also realize that there is never a single story about a single group of people, we can also regain a kind of paradise. For me, this paradise means the end of stereotyping between Yoruba Nigerians and African Americans. It means helping one another overcome our faults rather than using them to define the other, and ultimately ourselves, as different. I imagine a paradise where Yoruba Nigerians, and ultimately all Africans, and African Americans reach a place of better understanding of each other. There is always an inherent danger in believing and telling a single story. My hope is that more research on the relationships between Africans and African Americans will help complete the story.

⁹⁷ Chimamanda Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, video recording, 18:43, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

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APPENDIX

Wumi Ademola, age 46, is the co-pastor of Dominion International Center (DIC) in Houston, Texas. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism. Born in the United States, she relocated to Nigeria at the age of seven with her parents, who were studying for their Ph.D's in mathematics. She returned with her husband to live in the United States in the mid-1990s.

Ademola Ige (Demola) was born in Ekiti State, Nigeria. He studied Accounting at the University of Ilorin. He moved to the United States in 2015. He is now married with two daughters.

Bolanle Babayemi (Bola) was born in Nigeria and moved to the United States with her family over 20 years ago. Since her re-locations, she now has three beautiful daughters. She is also a member of DIC and is currently working towards a degree in professional writing from the University of Houston Downtown.

Dickson Adeyemo, age 36, was born in Ilorin, Nigeria. He received his B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Ilorin and earned his M.Sc. in Subsea Engineering from the University of Strathclyde in the United Kingdom. He has been in the United States for 5 years.

Oluwatobi Ogundiya (Tobi), 49 years young, was born in Kaduna State, Nigeria. She moved to the U.S in 2000, working as a Certified Nursing Assistant. She is now married with triplets.

Adeshina Elegbede (Shina) was born in Lagos, Nigeria and attended the University of Ilorin with Dickson, also earning a B.S in Civil Engineering. He went on to get his M.Sc. in Coastal Engineering from Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology in Norway. He also moved to the U.S. 5 years ago.

Omotayo Elegbede (Tayo) is the wife of Adeshina and was also born in Lagos, Nigeria—though they did not meet until after they were in the United States. She earned a B.A from the University of Lagos. She moved to the U.S.in 2010. She and Shina now have a handsome baby boy.

Kareem Abioye is 36 years old and was born in Lagos, Nigeria. He moved to the U.S. at the age of 18 and earned a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Prairie View A&M University. He is working toward his MBA.

Eyamba Ita was born in Cross River state, Nigeria but grew up in Russia from an early age. While in Russia, he earned his B.S. in Petroleum Engineering. He later moved to Norway and attended the Norwegian Institute of Science and Technology with Adeshina. He graduated with a M.Sc. in Petroleum Engineering. Eyamba moved to Houston in 2013.

Adetunji Elegbede (Tunji), age 31, was born in Lagos, Nigeria. He is the younger brother of Adeshina. He too graduated from the University of Ilorin with a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering. Tunji moved to the U.S. in 2012 to attend Prairie View A&M University. He now has a M.S. in Mechanical Engineering.