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Constructing My Cultural Identity: A Reflection on the Contradictions, Dilemmas, and Reality

This article provides a critical reflective analysis of my life growing up in Jamaica where I attended colonial school, to making the transition to high school in the Canadian context. I examine the elements that have influenced my cultural/racial identity as a person of African ancestry living in the diaspora. I ask questions such as how has colonial education influenced my cultural identity and how I see myself? I address the complexity of my racial and gender identity drawing on a Black feminist theoretical framework and anticolonial thought to inform this work.

Cet article présente une analyse critique et réfléchi de mon enfance en Jamaïque, où j'ai étudié à une école coloniale, et de ma transition vers l'école secondaire au Canada. Je me penche sur les éléments qui ont influencé mon identité culturelle/raciale comme personne d'ascendance africaine vivant dans la diaspora. Je pose des questions portant sur l'influence de l'éducation coloniale sur mon identité culturelle et ma façon de me voir. Ce travail repose sur le cadre théorique du féminisme noir, ainsi que sur la pensée anticoloniale.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine the forces that have shaped my identity as a child of the African diaspora, first growing up in the Caribbean and then the encounter between my Jamaican culture and the Canadian cultural context. I attempt to address the following questions: How has my identity been formed? What parts of my life have been honored, and what parts are excluded and why? How does society view me versus my own definition of myself? And more important, how can I salvage and maintain my identity? I critically draw on the reality, dilemmas, and contradictions of life that show my struggle to negotiate my identity and self-awareness as an individual of African ancestry in the Jamaican and later the Canadian education system.

The discussion in this article is informed by a Black feminist standpoint. I believe that theorizing from a Black feminist discursive framework helps me to tell my story and rethink my experiences in a paradigm that takes into account the social dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other forms of domination. In addition, I employ an anticolonial framework, as this emphasizes the potency of racism, colonization, and imperialism on diasporic peoples and their identity (Dei, 2002).

My Discursive Framework

As mentioned above, this article takes a Black feminist standpoint in accordance with the perspective of a Black heterosexual woman living in Canada. It is an approach—a framework—from which one can challenge systems of

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domination in society. A Black feminist discourse helps me to tell my story and reclaim my identity as a Black woman. As Wane (2002) notes in her definition of Black feminist thought,

Black feminist thought is a theoretical tool meant to elucidate and analyze the historical, social and economic relationships of women of African descent as the basis for development of a liberatory praxis ... It can be applied to situate Black women's past and present experiences that are grounded in their multiple oppressions. (p. 38)

Black feminism has provided a space and a framework for the expression of Black women's diverse identities. I believe that Black Canadian feminist thought is informed by practice and vice versa. In other words, my lived realities inform theory and help me to make sense of what is going on around me. Black Canadian feminist theory, then, becomes a practical way for me to make sense of my experiences in a Canadian context vis-à-vis Black women in the United States context. This makes it especially significant to tell my story as a Black woman experiencing life in Canada. However, sharing one's story can be painful. Yet it can also be a liberating and transformatory experience. hooks (1993) writes, "Telling the truth about one's life is not simply about naming the bad things, like exposing horrors. It is also about being able to speak openly and honestly about feelings and experiences" (p. 27).

At the same time, it must be noted that Black women's experiences are not homogeneous, but they do share a distinct form of oppression. By using a Black feminist framework, racialized and gendered individuals can collectively mark their presence in the world where Black women have for so long been denied the privilege of speaking (Mirza, 1997). Furthermore, Parmar (1987) points out that being cast in the role of the *Other*—marginalized and discriminated against not only in everyday discourse, but also in the grand narratives of European thought—Black women have fought to assert privately and publicly their sense of self, a self rooted in particular history cultures and languages. Thus the experiences of women of African descent are crucial to Black feminist thought. In turn, Black feminist theory captures our experiences and helps us to reconstruct our lives in a positive form.

In conjunction with Black feminist theory, I also take on an anticolonial, discursive framework because it challenges systems of domination and subordination and their continuing effects on Indigenous peoples across the world. Furthermore, because anticolonial discourse is about the absence of colonial imposition, colonialism must be seen not from the perspective of being foreign, but rather as a system of domination and conquest (Dei, 2002). This type of discourse allows one to challenge institutionalized systems of domination.

Reflections of my Lived Reality

I speak from the perspective of a person who is colonized. As a result of my experiences, I have a keen knowledge of imperialism, and its effect is central to the decolonization process, which in turn is at the core of reclaiming my identity. Before this can be done, I need to know who I am.

After listening to a lecture on race and representation by Hall (1997), I concluded that I was a cultural hybrid. That is, my identity is not fixed, but changes depending on where I am. As Hall asserts, cultural identity comes

from somewhere and has a history. However, cultural identity is not static and is subject to the continual play of history, power, and culture. Similarly, Two-Trees (1993) describes herself: "I see myself as a multi-dimensional: faceted being, one facet being woman, one artist, one African American, one Native American. To speak of any one facet more than another dulls the beauty of the whole thing reflecting light" (p. 14).

I remember when I was a youngster staring at myself in the mirror and asking myself the question "Who are you?" Years later, I imagine looking through a cracked mirror and seeing figments: a distorted, fragmented image of myself. I am still searching for the real me. First of all, am I from Africa? Growing up in Jamaica and in Canada, it was extremely difficult to associate myself with being from Africa. For me *Africa* was a dirty word. I literally thought that Africans were like monkeys, swinging from vines and in need of being "civilized." So I absolutely refused to be labeled African. Yet one cannot run from who one is. Being African is deeply engrained in me despite the fact that I tried to negate my African identity. I became conscious that I was Black, and therefore deemed to be ugly, at an early age. I remember that it was always the lighter-skinned people in my junior school in Jamaica who were considered academically bright and who were the teachers' favorite students. Sometimes it did not matter how hard you tried; darker-skinned students were deemed inferior and were treated as such. So I learned to negate my Blackness at an early age, and schooling helped create in me a marginalized identity. With few exceptions, darker-skinned students like myself were deemed intellectually inferior. I continually asked myself as a child, "Why did my mother have to make me Black with hair like coconut husk when she was light-skinned with long hair?"

When I lived in Jamaica, I was Black and considered ugly. Some family members treated me as inferior vis-à-vis lighter skinned relatives. For example, during an overnight visit with a close relative, I was given old, torn clothes to sleep in and a sheet to cover myself with, whereas my lighter-skinned relative was given brand new clothes and sheet. Other times, relatives would openly ridicule my short, tightly curled hair. Everything around me including people's attitudes indicated to me that I was lesser than lighter-skinned persons. Years later when I went back for a visit, people noticed that my hair had grown longer and that my skin tone had become brown, or lighter. I was now brown and pretty. Ironically, not until my second year in a Canadian university did I start feeling good about myself as an individual of African ancestry. My perception of myself had been negative despite what I used to hear about Black being beautiful, for I lived in a world where to be Black produced feelings of shame, worthlessness, and anger. Although Jamaican society is predominantly made up of people of African ancestry, the reality in the schools and at home did not necessarily reflect the view that Black was beautiful. As Young (2006) asserts,

To be Black is to have accrued a subjectivity haunted by the spectral traces of a social, political and ideological history. Blackness is historically and culturally specific embodied discourse constituted in and through a discursive tradition mobilized by the reconstituted figure of Africa and brutal systems of oppression such as slavery and imperialism. (p. 25)

Furthermore, my skin was not the only signifier of inferiority. Indeed, hair texture was also a mark of status. The closer one's hair was to Anglo-Saxon texture, the better treated the individual might be. Growing up in Jamaica, my hair was detrimental to my identity. If only my texture was silky like that of my mother, grandmother, and sister, who were amicably referred to as Douglá (half Indian) by family and community members. When I was younger, my mother would pull and tug at my hair to comb through it. I remember once the comb broke in half. I was the one with the bad hair.

Lighter-skinned people always seemed to be better off than the darker-skinned ones. Yet money for food had to be prioritized. I borrowed a hot comb from a friend and decided to straighten my hair. Many times I would parade around with burned skin from the hot comb, but my thoughts at the time were that it was worth it. Similarly, TwoTrees (1993) notes,

Since I was a child my hair has been the plague of my life. I longed for the silken braids of my father's mother but what I beheld in the mirror was hair made of iron, curved and twisted like mountain snake back roads and wild stubborn as kudzu, a weed that grows like an unchecked brush fire. (p. 17)

Such feelings continue today. Recently a close family member told me that my 5-year-old niece was asked at school why her hair was not like her sister's. In other words, she has "bad hair" whereas her little sister has "good hair." Unfortunately, at the young age of 5, my niece has already learned to hate and to question her African identity. By the time I was 8 years old, I believed I had to get rid of my hair texture by whatever means necessary. I pressured my mother to send me to the hairdresser. I saw the privileges bestowed on those whose physical features more closely resembled those of people with Anglo-Saxon ancestry, and I craved it. hooks (1993) discusses the politics of hair and its effect on the Black female identity. She asks an important question: How is it that little Black girls learn even before they know anything about racism that their hair is a problem? In her examination of the politics of skin color, she argues that without a doubt, dark-skinned Black females suffer the most abuse when Black people internalize white supremacist notions of beauty. As she argues, we live in a white supremacist culture where aspects of Blackness are highly devalued. "Blacks are wounded by forces of domination regardless of our access to material privilege. We are all wounded by white supremacy" (p. 87).

Unfortunately, this experience is also common with other groups who have been colonized: "Right through high school and even university I wanted to be white" (Yee, 1993, p. 23). This experience mirrors my own as I too negated my Blackness until adulthood and spent almost all my life yearning to be white. Similarly, First Nations writer Harp (1998) recounts:

To be me required the examination of who I was. In the quiet of my solitude, I began to assess my faculties I was able to ascertain the following: I had been thinking like a European. I had been feeling like a European. I had been acting like a good European. (p. 67)

So colonialism has not only destroyed and displaced peoples, but has also left many of them psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually wounded. Similarly, Jegede (1995) notes,

I was a self-hater. I despised myself because of the colour of my skin. I wanted to kill those of lighter complexion. And do you know why? because people love the children with the light skin and the long hair. "Oh what a pretty child, she got good hair." I was the one people called dark Vaida or Kizzy from roots. I used to get both Black and White dolls, and I would only play with the White ones, they were the prettiest with long luxurious hair. And, I too wanted the prettiest of long blond hair and blue eyes. (p. 116)

Colonial Educational Experiences

When I came to Canada and started high school, not much changed. I would skip swimming classes and often end up in the principal's office for doing so. How could I tell them that I did not wish to get my hair wet because it would be too arduous to comb? How could I say I was different, but it did not make me inferior? After my senior high school years, I began to perm my hair less. Nonetheless, I believe in my undergraduate university years that some transformation away from a colonial mentality was occurring. Sewell (1997) writes:

Historically, Black people's hair has been devalued along with the colour of their skin. In the context of the new world, plantation societies, hair remained a powerful symbolic currency that indicated one's place in the racial hierarchy. Under this system, the African attributes were devalued and the European elements could facilitate upward social mobility. (pp. 24-25)

In my Canadian high school, people from the dominant group in society openly made fun of the physical features of people of African ancestry. It was shameful to be Black even in the best of times. It did not matter that my mother loved me. It did not matter that I had friends who supported me. Nothing can prepare the Black person for the tremendous assault on his or her African identity.

Mervyn (2002) argues that even in contemporary Jamaica a manifest series of beliefs and attitudes perpetuate the pathologies of slavery. She adds, "pictures that represent a person as too Black are regularly discarded. And there is current obsessive focus on mitigating Blackness of the skin tone by bleaching. The goal is to achieve a more brown tone" (p. 18). Yet in the face of colonization and domination, there is also resistance. Some resistance can be heard in the music, which promotes the beauty of having an African identity.

Hair is a major area of contestation. By straightening my hair I had a clear desire to modify my African texture, thereby bringing it closer to a European norm. "In a colonized world, hair is a feature of salience and of equal value to skin colour in the construction of social value so that straight hair can compensate for Black skin and reward the person with higher social status" (Mervyn, 2002, p. 44). Interestingly enough, there are parallels in the education systems of colonial Jamaica and Canada. As in Jamaica, there is the assault on the Black child's self-identity in the Canadian education system. For example, Maylor (1995) notes, "The contrast between my dark skin and white teeth provided a source of derision for one of my teachers ... If we turn the lights out we will be able to see Uvanney's teeth" (p. 43). As McCarthy (1997) suggests, "Historically, education has been a principal site for the reproduction and elaboration of racial meaning and racial identities" (p. 544).

My life as an undergraduate university student was not always what I had expected. In one of my political science classes, I and two other Black students

were the only students of color. On the first day of class, the professor, who was from the dominant culture and female, passed the attendance sheet around for us to ensure our that names were listed. I was utterly shocked to see that the word *Black* was written next to my name. I glanced at the names on the list and saw *Black* written next to the names of the other two Black students. I felt angered, but also powerless. The three of us tried to make sense of the situation, yet it was difficult to rationalize. This was only a few years ago. We talked about the consequences of taking a complaint to the university's administration. Eventually, because of concerns that they might be graded lower by this professor, the other two students dropped out of the class. One could argue that they were forced out. Although I was determined to stay, after the third class I kept feeling more and more invisible. Then I too dropped out of the course. To this day I wonder what more I could have done to address this action that marginalized us. McCarthy (1997) asserts that inequality exists in school settings and that various groups based on their race, class, and gender have qualitatively variable experiences in schools. She says that the groups exist in constitutive tension and often compete with each other where each student receives varying forms of rewards and evaluations. This has serious implications for students who are perceived as inferior. The question, then, is how can we decolonize education practices in Canada or in Jamaica and make education holistic?

Whether yesterday or today, the fact still remains that as people of African ancestry, we still live on the fringes of society. My ancestors have added depth and personality to my life on a personal level. The places I speak from are multifaceted. My identity has so many aspects. Many Jamaicans, including me, were always proud to say that we had some Scottish ancestry. It is often echoed with pride and dignity. Yet although we know that we have African blood in our veins, we are proud of the non-African blood as if it made us better and more human.

Earlier I would be quick to say that I had nothing in common with African people. I am Jamaican. Yet to consider myself Jamaican is to ignore the existence of the Indigenous peoples of Jamaica who were not African Blacks, but rather the Taino, the true Jamaicans to put it bluntly. How can I ignore their presence? Whenever I visit the Island, I can feel their presence/spirit around me. We learned through history that the Indigenous population was virtually wiped out. But although I know that many have suffered death and genocide, I believe that many of we African peoples in the diaspora have Indigenous blood in our veins. Why does my maternal grandmother resemble the Indigenous peoples, and how do I reclaim this part of my own identity? What about their contribution to the construction of Jamaican national identity, which has been largely ignored?

I recently asked a friend how could I know what country in Africa my ancestors were from. He replied, "It does not matter. You are from Africa." I agree. Gone are the days when I found it necessary not to equate myself with people of African ancestry. I know that my ancestors are speaking to me. They guide me through the struggles of everyday life, and I have so much to thank them for. I find myself being drawn closer to my ancestors. My multifaceted

identity symbolizes the nature of the diaspora. There need be no state of confusion.

For example, I was looked down on for speaking the rich Jamaican language by school personnel both in Canada and in Jamaica as well as in the family. It was and still is associated with underachievement. Although we had a deep-seated knowledge that the language was part of the heritage of our African ancestors, it became easy to negate it. It was not until I was working on my master's thesis that I realized that the words were a form of resistance and one of the languages that emerged from the imposition and dislocation caused by slavery. Still today, I am scolded for speaking the language I know by the education system, family, and society. Yet another essential part of my identity is silenced. I was taught that it was an obstacle to any form of achievement. Nonetheless, I consider it to be a confirmation of my true identity as an African woman. Like many other Black students, I know English. Yet we choose to speak our language, which is viewed as a deficit by the school system in Canada and in Jamaica. I speak from personal experience. Blacks who speak our language, referred to as *patois*, are often placed in applied-level streams in high school, and they often become working-class poor as a result. Solomon and Brown (1998) assert that Black students are three times more likely to be in special education classes than in gifted classes. I always wondered why so many of us were in special education classes. Like many other Black students, I was stereotyped as uneducated and backward and lacking the desire to speak "proper" English. This was yet another attack on the identity of Black children.

Identity and Representation

Can I truly consider myself Canadian? How can I fit into the traditional definition of what constitutes a Canadian when some people of African ancestry who have been in Canada for several generations are still asked where they are from? Or even worse, First Peoples are continually asked what country they are from. Yee (1993) speaks of never being Canadian although she grew up in Canada. As she puts it, "I am constantly separated from-by the forces of racism that always keep me asking questions of identity, belonging, place and voice" (p. 4). At the same time as knowing the truth of how Canada came to be, I have to ask myself, is it really that bad not to be considered Canadian? Perhaps not at all. My hair, a physical marker, is now a public and political statement of my Black African identity. I also sit in a privileged position as a doctoral student. Nonetheless, being Black in Canada is a liability, and the greater civil society is not always kind to the Other. People of African ancestry are systematically marginalized in Canadian society. The proof of this is evident. Some diseases are specific to Blacks because of our low economic status in society. We are popular in the criminal justice system, and we suffer high levels of both unemployment and underemployment. Many images in society reinforce our Otherness. All these factors limit our life chances. I can only imagine what my ancestors went through to carve even this space for me today. Much of my existence in this society has been a lonely journey. Although I lived in a predominantly Black country during my childhood, colonial attitudes die hard. I became aware of being the Other at an early age. Ironically, because of the psychological injury I faced in my everyday life, I woke up from a state of

unconscious existence to consciousness of my gender, racial, and class position in society.

The oppression and marginalization I have endured and the challenges I have overcome in my life have helped me to feel that I can do whatever I wish regardless of the obstacles. As peoples whose identity and culture has been stolen, destroyed, distorted, and omitted from knowledge production we must—for our ancestors, ourselves, and most of all for our children so that they can have a strong sense of cultural identity and self—strive to manage the claws of colonization.

I too have passively accepted the notion that people of African ancestry are lazy. Often I wondered why and how they had never contributed to anything. I thought that we deserved to be treated as a subjugated race because of our inadequacies. Yet it was later as an adult that I realized that we have indeed contributed to society, but these contributions have been omitted from the history books.

Growing up in contemporary Jamaica, I recall that anything European was regarded in high esteem. As Blacks we were taught to despise anything that was reminiscent of our African heritage. The placing of Europeans at the center of civilization in the education system also enabled me to reject my own identity. As a people, we are in denial of ourselves, our history, and the history of racism. I received many contradictory messages from society. Yet gaining access to higher education has helped me in the process of immersing myself in my Blackness. I have exposed my inner self through reflecting on my experiences like a lost child suffering from withdrawal from its mother. I feel the need to reconnect and reclaim my identity and embrace myself. Slavery, conquest, and colonialism created dominant and subjugated peoples. It also meant the representation of the dominant people as superior beings vis-à-vis the Other.

Wangoola (2000) notes how Africans in their new environment used whatever resources they had to shield their traditions, which were continually under attack. The ancestors sacrificed greatly to bring our sacred knowledge to us. How, then, can I not honor sacred ancestral spiritual healing traditions such as Pochomania, Kunina, and Obeah. How can I continue to negate such African spirituality? During slavery these Indigenous forms of spirituality were perceived as pagan. The masters wanted us to believe that as African peoples our intellectuality never rose above magic and superstition (Mervyn, 2002). Yet is this any different from Catholic rituals that are deemed normal? Do we not as African peoples have the right to have our knowledge taught in schools as are the dominant traditions? Graveline (1998), in *Circle Works*, remarks how she draws on traditional Aboriginal knowing to assist her in surviving the nightmares of contemporary society. I often go to Jamaica and partake in the healing offered by these ceremonies. These are symbols of the resistance and survival of my ancestors. As African Indigenous ways of knowing survive, or the ways that we as African peoples have reinvented in order to hang onto our identity, I too am drawn back to my roots almost as a form of self-representation. Living in North America, sometimes it is a struggle as a Black female for me to make it through each day. These Indigenous ways of knowing keep me going. I think about the drums I hear beating, the chanting and singing, forbidden to partake fully in such sacred ceremonies because even my own

family, who are part of the colonial project, see them as backward. Yet the sound of the drums keeps me alive.

Colonialism succeeded on one hand, but once one starts to view the world from another lens, colonialism becomes a failure. Colonial education alienated the local people from their environment and denigrated local culture and traditional values and norms (Ellis, 1988). Everything about my Blackness that was negated is now at the center of my inner being.

Wangoola (2000) notes how African values, ceremonies, and festivals were undermined. To keep our traditions alive, our ancestors had to blend and create spiritual systems. Like Graveline (1998), I too reach out to the knowledge passed down from the ancestors for spiritual healing whenever my identity is wounded by assaults from Eurocentric-dominated institutions. These ways are deeply embedded in African peoples.

Wangoola (2000) asserts that in matters of modernization and progress, there was only one knowledge, Western knowledge. Other knowledges were branded as inferior or pure ignorance. Thus African medicine became witchcraft. When I am among some people from the dominant group, as a racialized person I continually find myself rejecting my race when it collides with the dominant group's perceptions. I find myself having to reject my identity according to the space in which I find myself. Colonialism was designed deliberately to breed self-hate among the colonized so as to legitimize its subordination of other people. As a racialized individual, I am perceived as different. When people see me, they often ascribe the stereotypical elements by which most Black women are portrayed. For example, there is often an underlying assumption that I am a loud, boisterous, single mother with no formal education. People are often shocked to discover that I am a doctoral student. I believe that in order to create more inclusive education curricula, that is, less Eurocentric, people's attitudes must change. In other words, how people think and the ideologies with which so many individuals have been indoctrinated need to be altered. Second, individuals will have to be willing to learn more diverse perspectives on what we have come to know as the norm. Furthermore, educators in the system will need to implicate their teaching practices as well as their perceptions of the students they teach. Textbooks written by non-Europeans and the world views of people other than Europeans need to be voiced in educational institutions to create balance and a welcoming learning environment for all children.

Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned above, I carry colonization within me. I believe that we all do. What is more, we have been indoctrinated to think that Eurocentrism is superior. As Wane (2002) noted in a recent lecture, "the decolonisation process starts within oneself" (Lecture notes: Wk. 5). Furthermore, as anticolonial thinkers, we must deconstruct and demystify what we have come to know as truths in order to reclaim who we truly are and thereby find inner peace. As a teacher and a learner, it is my responsibility to create a space where other forms of knowing can be considered valid. I must share my knowledge with others to help them develop a consciousness of historical and ever-present oppression. As colonized peoples, we all need to gather our resources. We must also create allies with those who can relate to our experiences. We need to tell our stories

and rewrite our history from our own perspective. Most important, we need to be community-driven and challenge contemporary colonization by privileging all sorts of knowledges. As mentioned above, there are many examples in society of violence toward the Black African identity and other marginalized groups. And we know that the education system omits the contributions of people of African ancestry, and even worse, denigrates many children of African ancestry. Blacks have been subjugated and forced to accept colonial views through a Eurocentric education. Such institutions are a reflection of the larger society and vice versa. I believe that it is important to reject my old identity, shaped to a large extent by White Eurocentrism, and to create a new one shaped by us. We have suffered loss of identity and fragmentation. We have been denied our true origin, and we in turn have denied ourselves our true African identity and internalized racism and oppression.

I believe that it is important for us, we who are aware of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression, to strategize on how we can build and foster positive cultural identity in our children. We have an obligation to put our energy into serving as mentors for the younger generation. We need to reclaim our heritage. It must not fade away or be forgotten. As the late reggae singer Garnett Silk echoed in the lyrics of his song, "Hello mamma Africa how are you? I am feeling fine and I hope you are fine too. Mamma Africa, yes I am coming home." For me, this is a powerful symbol of who I am, and it shows the discontinuous history of Blacks in the diaspora. I can hear the voices of those ancestors calling me. As Talbot (1984) notes, "Our race memory must be with spirit of those of the crossing, with the pain of the scattering, with the humiliation of the oppression and now in the pride of the gathering" (p. 95). It is reclamation time. So as African peoples, we need to gain control of our education and gain political control of our communities.

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