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## Becoming "Black" in America: Exploring Racial Identity Development of African Immigrants

Godfried Agyeman Asante  
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Becoming “Black” in America: Exploring Racial Identity Development of African Immigrants

By

Godfried Agyeman Asante

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MA

In

Communication Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato,

Mankato, Minnesota

April 2012

Becoming “Black” in America: Exploring Racial Identity Development of African Immigrants

Godfried Agyeman Asante

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee

Dr. Sachi Sekimoto (PhD), Advisor

Dr. Shannon Miller (PhD)

Dr. Christopher Brown (PhD)

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Finally, an honorable mention goes to my family and friends for their support and understandings throughout the duration of my graduate studies.

### **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Samuel Agyei Asante who passed away in March 2011. It is also dedicated to my mother, Janet Yaa Serwaa Obeng who motivated me to go to graduate school.

### **Abstract**

Godfried Asante wrote *Becoming “Black” in America: Exploring Racial Identity Development of African Immigrants* in completion of his Masters degree in Communication Studies in Minnesota State University, Mankato.

This qualitative study critically examined how African immigrants experience racialization and the process of developing Black racial consciousness. Focus group interviews were conducted to sample the collective racial experience among African immigrants. Thematic analysis was used as the basic methodology for analyzing the data. It was discovered that the participants “become African” and also “become Black” during the process of racial identification. “Becoming African” and “Becoming Black” constituted two sets of processes that simultaneously shaped the identity of African immigrants as they assimilated into the United States. From the study it became evident that there was tension between ethnic identification as African and racial identification as Black. Most of the participants affirmed their ethnic identity as African over their racial identity. Using the culturalist racist discourse as the conceptual framework, I argued that ethnic definitions do not overturn the negative connotations of blackness. Rather, it assumes the contemporary colorblind nature of American society while the system of racism stays the same.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

What is this that I embody?  
 It has a meaning  
 My skin speaks, my body speaks  
 It speaks for me  
 My skin denotes an ambiguity  
 Yet I know no dignity  
 I am the black man, the ethnic man  
 I walk in blackness  
 But I reject my likeness  
 So, I yearn for the light  
 To shine on my dark skin  
 Blackness, the antithesis of whiteness  
 Blackness, the commodified body

I am the last to be called  
 But the first to be stopped  
 I am the tree with many fruits  
 But no one to eat my fruits  
 Pain and anguish befalls me  
 But it's part of my reality  
 Such is my life  
 I am black.

“I never felt Black until I came to the United States.” These words came out of my mouth in my intercultural communication class as I reflected on the implication of my skin color in the United States. As an African immigrant from Ghana, I had never felt my melanin until I came to the United States. In Ghana, I never had to think about being Black; no one even brought up the color of my skin in a conversation. However, since I moved to the United States, I have become part of the Black race in America, being identified primarily by the color of my skin. Developing my racial consciousness in the U.S. helped me become aware of the space I

occupied as a Black immigrant at the intersection of race and ethnicity. My experience primed me to engage in academic inquiry on the impact of racialization on African immigrants in the United States. This research is necessary as this area of scholarship has been minimally studied.

In what follows, I will introduce the purpose and justification of this study; provide a brief overview of African immigration; and outline my research questions.

### **Purpose of Study**

This research project seeks to explore African immigrants' racialized experience and their struggle to maintain an ethnic identity free of racial prejudice and misconceptions in a racialized society. Through a qualitative analysis of focus group interviews, I will a.) explore the process of racial identification among immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and b.) analyze how these immigrants negotiate their ethnic identity as African within the discourse of race relations in the United States.

Throughout my studies in the United States, I pondered on the issue of blackness in America based on my experiences. For example, I have been called a "nigger," pulled over by a police officer for not putting on a seat belt when I clearly had it on, been told by a white girl she could not go on a date with me because her parents do not like black people, been followed around in a shop by the store attendant, or been asked for my ID to confirm my credit card was not stolen while s/he doesn't ask my White friends. Due to these experiences, I wanted to disassociate myself from Black people and maintain my African identity by emphasizing my national identity to my friends. Even though I tried to maintain my African identity, my blackness was unmistakably visible than my "Africanness." Therefore, I had to assume a Black identity

This research project focuses on the process of racial identification among African

immigrants. It elaborates on how sub-Saharan African immigrants develop an African consciousness upon arrival to the United States and how they experience and negotiate blackness. Throughout this research, I examined the African immigrant as a postcolonial subject who comes from a non-racialized society with a different system of social stratification to a racialized system of classification. In exploring this, I analyzed the process of racialization, specifically focusing on what it means to be black to sub-Saharan African immigrants and their collective experiences with race. In addition, I augment the findings of this research with my own experience with blackness in the United States and the process through which I realized and accepted my blackness.

### **African Immigration to the United States**

The increasing migration of African immigrants to the United States since the late 1970s and early 1980s has resulted in a growing discourse and literature on the contemporary experiences of Black immigrant groups (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007). Immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are a growing component of the U.S. population. They are a part of the racial and ethnic transformation of the United States, creating changes in the demographics of Black people and the interpretation of blackness in the twenty-first century. These immigrants are faced with different challenges as they try to adapt to their new environment in the United States. Through the process of adapting to a new culture, these immigrants go through a series of identity changes that shape their self-concept. These immigrants encounter the meaning of race and the implication of their skin color in the United States. Although immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa like myself are aware of the “White” and “Black” racial politics of the world, many have not experienced how it feels to be racialized. Black immigrants confront the structure of racialized social system in America, which provides a “structure for judging

attributes of blacks” (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007, p.18). For Black immigrants, identifying as Black becomes problematic because of the dominant cultural constructs of blackness. According to Portes and Zhou (1993), the effect of the color line is obviously problematic for Black immigrants because of prejudice and stigma that may be attached to blackness.

The historical legacy of slavery in America and the Caribbean created a heightened sense of racial consciousness that Blacks in Africa were generally unfamiliar with (Pierre, 2004). Due to the differences in understanding of Black consciousness among African immigrants and African Americans, their identity formation would also be different. In her book, *Black identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*, Mary Waters (1999) explored how racial identification placements among some immigrant populations from the West Indies are different from usual interpretation of race in the United States. Waters wrote that immigrants from the West Indies are able to transcend the White and Black binary and embrace cultural or more nationality-based identities. This situation proves Gilroy’s (1993) assertion that the changing demography of North America is altering the historical White and Black dichotomy to a more hybrid and different racial identity categories. These research studies on Black immigrants are structured around the immigrants from the Caribbean Islands and their interpretation of racial categories. In this thesis project, I expand the research on Black immigrants to include sub-Saharan African immigrants who form the majority of immigrants from Africa (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007).

Ultimately, this research will add to the expanding literature on race and its continual significance on all people of African descent in the United States irrespective of their national origin. Some of the concepts that will be explored include Africanization, Postcolonial Identity theory, and Blackness as an American Experience.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative study will critically examine how African immigrants experience racialization and the process of developing a Black consciousness. Research questions are fairly broad to allow uncharted themes to emerge as this topic has been minimally studied. The following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1. How do sub-Saharan African immigrants experience race and racism in the United States?

RQ2. How do sub-Saharan African immigrants as post-colonial subjects negotiate their identities across racial, national and ethnic differences?

RQ3. How do sub-Saharan African immigrants experience, negotiate, or resist the process of “becoming Black” in the United States?

### **Précis of Chapters in Thesis**

Chapter two presents a literature review, which reconnoiters the social and cultural context of understanding how African immigrants understand racialization. This chapter situates the study in existing research and previous theories. The chapter exhibits a parade of literature related to this study and present the academic gap that this research will address. The Literature review presents studies and academic perspectives on William Cross’s model of Black racial identity development, Postcolonial theory, and immigrants and race.

The third chapter is the method section. It presents the research method I used to conduct this study. Focus group interviews were used to gather the collective experience of sub-Saharan African immigrants. The rationale for the use of focus group interviews, how the participants were selected, how many participants and the interviewing process are explained. Open coding and selective coding were used to group the data and emergent themes were engendered through

this process.

Chapter four is the results chapter of this study. The emergent themes from the open and selective coding are examined and presented. Themes are presented with quotations from the original data as evidence. The results are critically examined in relation to the previous literature to either support or refute previous assertions about African immigrants and their racialization process.

Chapter 5 examines the conclusions drawn from the study. The implications of this research are explored in detail in this section. The gaps to be filled in scholarship are also presented in this research. The chapter concludes the thesis with the suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Literature Review**

In this section, I introduce the reader to the various theoretical perspectives that are used to explain how sub-Saharan African immigrants make sense of their experiences with race in the United States. I will situate the experiences of these immigrants within the context of the literature on Black racial identity development, African immigrants as postcolonial subjects, and blackness as an American experience. These concepts will enable the reader to understand the arguments in this research.

#### **Black Racial Identity Development**

Cross (1994) provides a five-stage model of Black racial identity development for African Americans. The prevailing framework of Black racial identity development stems primarily from the development theory of Cross and Millions (Hocoy, 1999). Cross's model of racial identification uses a framework that identifies a five-stage process of racial identity development. Hocoy (1991) claimed that "Cross's model of racial identification have had empirical validation both experiential and quantitative" (p.3). Currently, it is the most basic framework for understanding the racial identity development of African Americans. The five-stage model is founded in a theory known as nigrescence, which is a French word meaning "the process of becoming Black" (Cross 1994, p. 120). According to Cross (1994), the nigrescence model attempts to capture the stages that African Americans transverse when experiencing a major shift in their racial self-identification. This model involves five separate stages, which are: Pre-encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-

Commitment.

Pre-encounter is the first stage of the racial identification model. At this stage, the African American has absorbed many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the notion that “White is right” and “Black is wrong.” Though the internalization of negative Black stereotypes may be outside of his or her conscious awareness, the individual seeks to assimilate and be accepted by Whites, and actively or passively distances him/herself from other Blacks.

Encounter is the second phase in this model. According to Cross (1994), this phase is typically precipitated by an event or a series of events that forces the individual to acknowledge the impact of racism in one’s life. For example, when the individual is faced with rejection from his/her white friends or colleagues, this may drive the individual to conclude that many Caucasians will not view him or her as an equal. Faced with the reality that he or she cannot truly be White, the individual is forced to focus on his or her identity as a member of a group targeted by racism.

In the third stage of this model, there is a simultaneous desire to surround oneself with visible symbols of one’s racial identity and an active avoidance of symbols of Whiteness. Parham (1989) explained that “At this stage, everything of value in life must be Black or relevant to blackness. This stage is also characterized by a tendency to denigrate White people, simultaneously glorifying Black people...” (p. 190). During this stage, the individual actively seeks out opportunities to explore aspects of their own history and culture with the support of peers from their own racial background. In my own experience at this stage of my racial development identification, I actively started researching black history and any form of ideology that was linked to blackness. Typically, White-focused anger dissipates during this phase



because so much of the person's energy is directed toward his or her own group and self-exploration.

The result of this exploration is an emerging security in a newly defined and affirmed sense of self (Cross, 1991, p.33). The fourth stage is the internalization stage. While still maintaining his or her connections with Black peers, the internalized individual is willing to establish meaningful relationships with Whites who acknowledge and are respectful of his or her self-definition. The individual is also ready to build coalitions with members of other oppressed groups. At this stage, the individual begins to realize his/her social group and standpoint in relation to whiteness. This prompts the individual to connect with other individuals who are in the same situation or who understands how it feels to be a minority. This stage is linked to the next stage.

Internalization-Commitment is the final stage of the model. During this stage, the individual finds a way to translate their "personal sense of blackness into a plan of action or a general sense of commitment" to the concerns of Blacks as a group, which is sustained over time (Cross, 1991, p. 220). The process of Internalization allows the individual, anchored in a positive sense of racial identity, both to perceive and transcend race proactively. According to Cross, the individual achieves a new sense of self and a motive to help and improve the image of the Black community. Most people at this stage begin to volunteer and help create programs that will improve the image of the black community.

In conclusion, this model presents a useful framework for understanding the racial development of African Americans. Cross (1994) wrote that African Americans go through a pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment stages in their racial identification. Even though this model was created for African Americans,

it will be germane to have a framework for understanding the racial experience of sub-Saharan African immigrants. The following theme will orient the reader to Africans in the diaspora.

### **Sub Saharan African Immigrants and Race**

Alexander (2004) said racial identification is a shared American experience. Which means that being in the United States makes one recognize their race and its implication. According to Pierre (2004), most social scientific studies on Black immigrants came after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Immigration reform Act of 1965. African immigrants have become part of the growing Black population in the United States. In spite of that, there is limited literature on their racial experience or their racial identification process. Therefore, in the following I will introduce the reader to a.) the history of Africans in the diaspora, including African immigrants migration to the United States and b.) the different social stratification systems prevalent in the United States and sub-Saharan Africa.

#### **Historical Background**

Migration of Africans to the United States started late in the 1600's during the slave trade. Many Africans were forced on slave ships and brought to North America to work on plantation farms (Gilroy, 1999). After the abolition of slave trade in Europe and South American countries, the Southern States in the United States refused to give up their slave trade, which resulted in the Civil War between the Northern States and the Southern States from 1861-1865 (Rozwenc, 1961). After the fight to be freed from slavery, African Americans were also subjected to the "separate but equal" legal doctrine that segregated Whites and Blacks in schools, restaurants, and even employment. Eventually, these laws were overturned in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Even though the United States has seen enormous change in its racial relations, race is still an issue in most parts of the country. West (2001) claimed that:

Given of a historical legacy in which racial ideologies influenced our philosophies, ideals, patterns of thinking, and ways of knowing the world, it comes as no surprise that our society is one in which, despite all arguments to the contrary, ‘race matters.’ (p.3)

On the other hand, Africans have gone through colonization under European rule that resulted in the division of Africa in the Berlin conference (1884-1885). This was initiated by Otto Von Bismarck, first chancellor of Germany to establish international guidelines for the acquisition of African territory, which was formalized as the “new imperialism” (Young, 2001). African countries were colonized from the mid 1800’s to the late 1900s. Ghana became the first country to gain independence from British rule under the leadership of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah in 1957. Subsequently, other African countries followed suit to free their countries from colonial rule. In retrospect, Africans and African Americans have been through different forms of oppression that has influenced their understanding of race and race relations.

Since the 1990s, the United States has seen a significant increase in immigrants, especially from sub-Saharan Africa. After the amendment in U.S. immigration laws in 1964, there has been a change in the racial and ethnic demographics in the United States. More to the point, changes in the immigration legislation have made it possible for immigrants to enter the United States, especially from Africa, beginning with the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, and the Immigration Act of 1990, which instituted the diversity lottery program among other laws.

Currently there are 1,035,253 foreign born African immigrants in the United States (see Table 2 of U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2011, Yearbook of immigration Statistics) for complete data). Countries with the most immigrants to the United States are Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt, Somalia and South Africa. These immigrants mostly come to the

United States for socioeconomic mobility, education and sometimes for business. According to Mary Mederios Kent from the Population Reference Bureau in Washington DC, Africans in America are the most educated immigrant group in the United States (Population bulletin, 2007, p.9). Kent stipulated that about 38 percent of all African immigrants hold a college diploma. This is an impressive figure in the United States. Consequently, it also shows the amount of brain drain in the continent of Africa.

### **Differences in systems of social Stratification**

African immigrants, especially those from sub-Saharan Africa, migrate from a non-racialized society and thus their perception of race is perturbed. Instead of racial categories, countries within the sub-Saharan African region have a different social stratification system. Clanism is a system used in most parts of Africa, which divides the society into nobles and non-nobles. In addition, “Clanism is a system of social differentiation where membership is determined through shared mythical ancestors” (Kusow, 2004, p.2). Therefore, race is an unfamiliar social marker for African immigrants who migrate to the United States. Race and clanism pose different social and cultural implications in both regions. Due to the differences in social stratification systems between the United States and sub-Saharan Africa, African immigrants who migrate to the United States interpret and experience race differently and present a unique insight into the race relations in the United States. According to Gilroy (1999),

The changing racial and ethnic profile of the North American population, particularly the increase in the number of non-white foreign-born immigrants, introduces a new sociological moment in which non-white immigrants not only bring their homeland racial and cultural identities, but also redefine the meaning of racial categories from the historically and contemporaneously normative black

and white dichotomy to a situation of multiple and hybrid identity categories (as cited in Abdi, 2006, p.3).

African immigrants are not only changing the demographics of North America but are also redefining the meaning of “blackness.” This presents new challenges and insights on the interpretation of race. According to Abdi (2006), who did a research study on racial formation among Somali immigrants in North America, he observed that Somalis had a different concept of racial categories informed by their tribal and ethnic background. This research postulated that African immigrants who move to the United States ultimately undergo a racialization process that they have to accept, resist or negotiate.

In short, African immigrants are changing the demographics of North America and eventually changing the definition of race relations from the normative White and Black to a situation of multiple and hybrid identity categories. The next theme will situate the identity of most African immigrants as postcolonial subjects to examine their understanding of being “Black” or being racialized from a post-colonial paradigm.

### **Post-colonial Identity**

According to Young (2001), “postcolonial critique involves the reconsideration of history, particularly from the perspective of those who suffered its effects together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact” (p. 4). Postcolonial critique allows me to analyze the impact of colonialism on the interpretation of “blackness” by African immigrants in the United States. Below, I will explain postcolonial identity, the impact of colonialism and the relevance of this concept to this study.

Africa underwent a system of colonization through which the West was presented as a symbol of power, reason, and civility. Postcolonial identity is a form of consciousness borrowed

from the colonists as a strategic tool to further control the minds of colonial subjects (Fanon, 1967). Subsequently, Africans who migrate to the United States might possess a hybrid identity with a postcolonial mindset. So, how did the African immigrant become a postcolonial subject? According to Young (2001), colonization was a pragmatic attempt by the colonialist in Europe to expand their territory for economic exploitation and settlement gains. Eventually, the colonial masters began to transpose their cultural values to their colonial subjects. For example, the French were able to accept an African as French if they gave up their African culture and adopted French ways (Khapoya, 1993). The borrowed Western culture has become part of the African culture and values, which has evolved to a postcolonial identity that proponents of postcolonial critique seek to uncover. A critical look at the West African sub region after colonial rule reveals not just the cultural breakdown of Africanism but also the replacement of African culture with Western values, language, and thought.

These cultural and economic influences left by the Europeans have caused Africans to look down upon themselves and assume the identity of the colonial masters. Fanon (1967) asserted this notion in his famous book *Black Skin White Masks* by thoroughly analyzing the psychological mechanism used to instill inferiority in a colonized culture. He wrote that the systemic dehumanizing social mechanism, which the colonists expended, caused the colonial subjects to be like them thereby ignoring their own culture. In his famous play *Things fall apart* by Chinua Achebe, the tragic hero, “Okonko” puts the problem of the colonized in his words as he died, saying, “ a knife has been put in the fabric of our society and torn apart” (p.199). During his visit to Africa, Du Bois (1923) criticized Europe’s treatment of Africa further by depicting it as a social and cultural rape of the continent and its people. He wrote:

The African family and clan life were disrupted in this transplantation, the communal life and free use of the land were impossible, the power of the chief was transferred to the master, bereft of the usual blood ties and ancient reverence (p.198).

Guided by a broken culture and a new identity, Africans who move to the United States carry a postcolonial identity, which is embedded within the Western ideology of “conquering the Black other.” This ideology, contrary to the African way of life, posits the African from a communal individual to a new system of social stratification based on “Whiteness.” Through the process of recreating the new African identity, the African now measures himself/herself through a new standard which Du Bois called the double consciousness whereby one looks at himself/herself through the other, in this case Whites. This notion has been the first African American critique of the alienating effects of the dominant culture (Young, 2001).

Colonization assisted the West to transpose their culture to their colonial subjects in Africa. As a result of this, Africans carry a postcolonial identity as they seek to resemble the colonial masters. Postcolonial identity can be one of the important contexts that shape African immigrant’s racial experience in the United States.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter explains the research method I used to conduct the study and the rationale for the method. I used focus group interviews to explore the collective experience of my participants. Focus group enabled me to draw upon the respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs and reaction in a way that would not be feasible using other methods such as personal interview or observation (Gibbs, 1997). This research explored the process through which African immigrants experience racialization and how they interpret their new racialized identity. More specifically, my research questions address:

RQ1. How do sub-Saharan African immigrants experience race and racism in the United States?

RQ2. How do sub-Saharan African immigrants as post-colonial subjects negotiate their identities across racial, national and ethnic differences?

RQ3. How do African immigrants experience, negotiate, or resist the process of “becoming black” in the United States?

In what follows, I describe the method of the study and the justification for the method.

#### **Data Collection**

This study analyzed the experiences of African immigrants within the racial politics of the United States. The underlying question throughout the study was to understand the process of racialization that sub-Saharan African immigrants go through coming from a society where skin color does not represent an important part of social stratification to a society where racial categories are relevant. As I am interested in examining personal experiences, a qualitative



study was most appropriate to accomplish my research goal. Through focus group interviews, I examined the collective experiences of sub-Saharan African immigrants and explored the salient themes of their racial experience. Morgan (1993) mentioned that focus group enables the researcher to find out why an issue is salient, as well as what is salient about it. Kitzinger (1994) argued that interaction is the crucial feature in focus group interviews because the interaction highlights their views of the world and the language they use about the issue. Focus group interviews enabled the participants to draw on each other's experience and have the confidence to voice it. The data were collected from five focus groups in Mankato, MN. In addition, the data were also juxtaposed with my personal narratives on race in the United States.

### **Assembling the Groups**

Twenty-three African students from Minnesota State University, Mankato were interviewed on their experiences as Black immigrants in the United States and how that experience shaped their identity. Since I am not studying a diverse group of people, this sample size is convenient given the complexity of the research problem, scope of problem, accessibility of potential participants and the time and resource that are available for the research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Ultimately, the aim of this study is not to assume that all African immigrants will undergo the same racial identification process or use the same identity negotiation strategies in the United States. Rather, this research will start a discussion on the continual inescapability of being racialized in the United States and its relevance in the lives of African immigrants. This sample size, which is a small representative of all African immigrants in the United States, gives me the opportunity to further explore racial identity negotiation of sub-Saharan African immigrants in the United States.

## **Participants**

The participants comprised of nine women and 14 men between the ages of 18-30 years old. Participants were recruited particularly from the African Student Association and the African Student Organization for Development and Progress (A.S.O.D.P) at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Members of these organizations were asked to sign up if they want to be part of this research through announcements at meetings and email solicitations. Those who signed up by providing their email were sent an email with the details of the focus group interviews including the location for the focus group interviews. This is a purposive or known group sampling method where the “researcher identifies a group of people that are known to possess a particular characteristic” (Reinard, 2008, p.446). Within this sample, the participants are African immigrants who have a unique perspective about race. First, they come from a homogenous racial society where the system of Clanism is prevalent. Second, they have to assume a racial category when they arrive in the United States, which is different from their home country.

Two sets of participants were recruited to find out if the length of stay in the United States would affect the themes that will emerge out of the study. Participants in the first group (GRP1) were those who have stayed in the United States from 3 months to 3 years. Participants in the second group (GRP2) comprised of students who have resided in the United States from 4 years and above/up. To protect the integrity of this research, participants were required to sign a consent form that informed them of their confidentiality. There were two focus group interviews for GRP1 and three focus group interviews for GRP2. After the initial discussions, some participants were selected for further face-to-face interviews.

## **Focus Group Interviews**

### **Preparing Study Mechanics**

The focus group interviews were held in the Student Union at Minnesota State University, Mankato between January 27<sup>th</sup> and February 24<sup>th</sup> 2012. The focus groups interview sessions were videotaped and voice recorded. Voice recording was essential for me to recollect important information that I missed during transcription of the data. Also, video recording helped me connect the voices to the faces of the participants if I mixed up the voices.

### **Preparing the Focus Group Session Materials and Questions**

I prepared a moderator guide to help with the discussion questions. Importantly, I kept an interview schedule and an interview guide. According to Gordon (1969), the interview schedule “emphasizes the means of obtaining information, whereas the interview guide emphasizes the goals of the interview in terms of topics to be explored and the criteria of a relevant and adequate response” (as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002,p.195). Format of the questions were open-ended questions to encourage further discussions of the question beyond the anticipated answers.

### **Conducting the Session**

The length of the focus group session was between one and a half to two hours. To ensure that everyone had a chance to share their experience, a maximum of seven participants and a minimum of five participants were placed in each focus group. All the focus group interviews were conducted in a conference room in MSU students union. Before the start of the session, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the study and distributed the consent forms. Finally, I reiterated the protocols for discussion before the interviews commenced.

After collecting the signed consent forms, I introduced the question for discussion and followed up with questions when needed. I was not restricted to the questions in the moderator guide, but used follow up questions and comments from the participants to further the discussion. According to Reinard (2008), “Sometimes moderators have to deal with different sorts of group members who might be shy, know it all people, over talkers and obnoxious people” (p. 286). During the interview session, I attempted to ensure an open environment where every participant can voice his or her opinion. I did this by allowing participants to write down some of their answers if they felt shy to talk and also asked over talkers that they can have more time to see me for further interviewing if they wish to.

Another challenge mentioned by Reinard (2008) is that “through the use of non-verbal cues and the tone of questions being asked, the facilitator may encourage some kind of responses and inhibit others” (p.286) Since I am also a sub-Saharan African immigrant conducting the focus group, I might expose nonverbal cues or use a particular tone to ask some questions which might make the participants think I am interested in a particular answer. This might hinder genuine responses from the participants. To keep me on track, I referred to the interview schedule and interview guide and monitored my non-verbal cues. Even though there could be some problems, I still think I was the best person to conduct the interview since a racially and ethnically different moderator could have hindered true answers from the participants and might have led to misleading results.

### **Analyzing Data and Preparing a Summary Report.**

The video recorded interviews were reviewed and transcribed for analysis. The videotaped interviews were analyzed thematically with particular attention to details regarding changing self-perceptions and experiences with racial identification. Similar themes across the

focus group were compared and analyzed for racial identification cues, specifically the struggle to maintain an ethnic or racial identity and the rejection or acceptance of the Black racial identity.

Thematic analysis was used as the basic methodology for analyzing the data. Droogsma (2007) performed in-depth interviews with Muslim women and analyzed their responses for themes denoting the importance of the Hijab in their lives. Through this methodology, she was able to capture some of the unique experiences that the participants encountered. Similarly, this study took a similar trend to beget the themes. During the process of analysis, both open coding and selective/axial coding were utilized. First, open coding, which is the initial unrestricted coding of data, was used to break the data into similarities and differences to identify recurring themes and dimensions for analysis (Strauss 1990). During open coding, I noted each incident in my data into as many categories of themes of analysis as possible to identify similar themes across the data. Second, by using selective coding, I compared all the initial categories of themes for similarities and differences until I found several central themes. After selective coding process, I examined the data for connections between major themes and sub-themes that resulted in the development of final themes. In the following chapter, I provide the analysis of the themes that emerged through my coding.

## Chapter Four

### Analysis

This chapter outlines the results of the study. The interview questions were used to guide five focus-group discussions and address the research questions. The results showed specific identity negotiation strategies that sub-Saharan African immigrants utilize to maintain their identity in a racialized society. The answers from the focus group interviews were coalesced into themes by placing the data into categories and subcategories to reflect the experiences of the participants. After that, I utilized a thematic approach to capture and explore the racial experiences of the participants.

In this chapter, I situate the experiences of the participants within the study and present dominant themes that emerged. I also contextualize the findings with my own experiences as a sub-Saharan African immigrant in the United States. This analysis provides the framework for understanding the process of assimilation experienced by the participants. I explore how the process of ethnic identification and the development of racial consciousness function in relation to each other within a racialized society. Generally, there were two major processes that shaped their identity as Black immigrants in the United States: “Becoming African” and “Becoming Black.” It was revealed that there was tension between being African and being Black and that tension produced various identity negotiation strategies that the participants utilize to assert their ethnicity as African over their racial identity.

In the first category “becoming African, I explore the process of developing an ethnic identity as “African” in the United States. Through the process of developing an ethnic identity as African, two themes emerged: “A representative of Africa” and “Africa as my home.” First, it

became apparent that the participants had developed a strong Pan-African identity after migrating to the United States. It was evident that certain experiences such as the negative images of Africa in the U.S. media drove the participants to have a strong Pan-African identity as a minority group. They saw themselves as ambassadors of Africa, promoting a positive image of the continent. In the theme “Africa as my home,” the participants understood their lived experience in the United States as transitory and not a permanent “home” even though some of the participants are American citizens. The participants created a diasporic home outside of the U.S. as a strategy to cope with, or separate themselves from the experiences of racism they encountered.

The second category is “becoming Black” in the United States. This category explores development of racial consciousness in the U.S. apart from gaining a Pan-African consciousness. The first theme, “I am not just African, I am also Black,” focuses on how the participants developed racial consciousness moving from a non-racialized society to a racialized society. During the process of developing Black racial consciousness, they also encountered the meaning and position of blackness in the U.S. racial hierarchy through interactions with African Americans and White Americans. The second theme, “Anything that wasn’t them was White,” illustrates the participants’ encounter with African Americans and how that influenced their racial development. Third, I explore how the experience with racism reinforced the self-image of the participants as Black people and the strategies they adopted to deal with racist encounters. Finally, I examine how the participants negotiated their ethnic identity over their racial identity. I realized that while some of the participants accepted their blackness in its entirety, others negotiated their blackness by accepting it only as a descriptor without claiming blackness as part

of their identity. Also, a few participants resisted the term Black claiming it could not define them.

Below, I begin my journey on how the participants became “ethnic” upon arrival to the United States and finally how they have come to identify as Black or African.

### **Becoming African**

In this section, I examine the process of becoming “African” in the United States. I realized that there were experiences that drove the participants towards ethnic identification and ethnic solidarity. It was revealed that there was a strong sense of Pan-African identity within the participants, which was not apparent when they were in their home countries. Most of the participants strongly identified as African instead of their nationality, which I found interesting since there are more than 50 countries in Africa. I explore this concept with two themes: ambassadors of the continent of Africa and second, Africa as home. These themes address the experiences that drove the participants towards self-identification as ethnic minorities. Below, I explore how the participants have assumed the position as ambassadors of Africa in the United States.

#### **“I See Myself as a Representative or an Ambassador of Africa”**

Eighteen out of the 23 participants strongly identified themselves as Africans instead of identifying with their respective country of origin. This form of identification was common in the responses regardless of the length of stay in the United States. The number of years spent in the United States did not seem to abate the desire to be African. Once, a friend asked me why I say I am from Africa if Africa is not a country, as he is from Japan and sees himself to be Japanese rather than Asian. Even though I have been in the United States for about 5 years, I hardly thought about the reason why I identify as African and not Ghanaian. It is worth noting



that Africa is a continent with about 56 countries and over 1000 ethnic groups (Hall, 2005). In the United States, West Africans are among the largest group of immigrants followed by East Africans, North Africans and lastly South Africans (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007). Although African immigrants share similar experiences as immigrants, there is tremendous heterogeneity within African immigrants in the United States. For example, among the Ghanaian immigrants there are the Ashanti's, Gas, and Ewes etc., and among Nigerian immigrants, there are the Yoruba, Igbo, and Ikiti among others.

The ability to transcend these ethnic and national identities and claim an African identity deserves careful examination. Even though the participants are clearly from the African continent, it is impossible to claim citizenry of a continent like Africa. When asked how they identified themselves in the United States, these participants identified as “African” or “Black African” rather than their nationality:

**Kwame:** I identify myself as African. Because I have travelled a lot and I realized that there are some values that I can identify as purely African values. So anywhere I go, I still get identified as African. (Kwame, Focus group Interviews, January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012)

**Kojo:** Well for me, even if I become a citizen of this country, I will still consider myself as a full-blown African. I feel more African than American. (Kojo, Focus group Interviews, February 10, 2012)

**Kwabena:** For me, I see myself as a representation of or an ambassador of Africa, for every movement and thing I do is how Africa is. (Kwabena, Focus group Interviews, February 3, 2012)

**Kwesi:** I think I will simply say I am black African. (Kwesi, Focus group Interviews February 3, 2012)

Kwame is from Niger, Kojo is from Nigeria but he is now an American citizen, Kwabena is from Togo and Kwesi is from Burkina Faso. These participants are from various countries in Africa but they now identify as African to the point of assuming an ambassadorial position of the continent. It is imperative to acknowledge that each African country has its own strong nationalistic bond within Africa. In addition, ethnic and tribal differences exist within these national boundaries. However, when these participants migrated to the United States, their nationalistic bonds have evolved into a collective African identity. Kwesi, a sophomore from Burkina Faso said:

**Kwesi:** I think I will simply say I am black African, especially from Burkina Faso. Because I was born in Burkina Faso, raised in Burkina Faso, [and] I just came here one and half years ago so [African] is my identity. (Kwesi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

Some of the participants claimed that some Americans did not know where their home country was. Therefore, by stating that they were “African,” it made it easy for their American friends to interact with them. As mentioned by Kwesi:

**Kwesi:** When I say I am from Burkina Faso, they look at me like where is that? So I always say I am African just to make it easy for them and me. (Kwesi, Focus Group Interview, February 3, 2012)

This confirms the general stereotype that non-Africans have about Africa as undifferentiated and also posits the “American” as superior and has the ability to call anyone with a Black skin

what he/she finds easy. One of the participants, Kojo from Nigeria said that prior to moving to the United States, he hardly had any interaction with people from other African countries:

**Kojo:** When I was back home, I didn't even realize that I wasn't even connected to any Ghanaian people or Togolese people, it was mostly Nigerians everywhere, but now when I meet someone from Ghana, it makes me wanna know more about them. (Kojo, Focus Group Interviews, February 10, 2012)

Hence, since he moved to the United States, he developed the desire to know more about people from other African countries. Not to say Africans coming together in the United States is by any means faulty, but the process of identification with the whole continent of Africa merits critical analysis. So, why do African immigrants mostly identify with their continent and not by their nationality?

#### **“Africa Already Has a Bad Connotation”**

It was evident that some of the participants wanted to be ambassadors of the continent of Africa because of the bad media reportage they had seen in the United States. They decried a number of times they had to behave in ways that counter the negative images associated with Africa. Some of the participants even mentioned that before they moved to the United States, they knew some of the negative perceptions about Africa shared by people in the United States.

Kwabena from Togo exemplified this perception:

**Kwabena:** Even before I came here, I knew there was this perception [about Africa], but there isn't much that has changed since I came here, I am not surprised when I see how Africa is perceived here. (Kwabena, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

In an effort to change the negative perceptions of Africa, the participants try to portray themselves as the opposite of those negative perceptions:

**Kwabena:** For me I see myself as the opposite of that, I have to bring the opposite idea to this country and they have to see a difference in me, how I relate to them and how I talk to them. (Kwabena, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

**Kari:** As African I see it as my duty to change some of the perceptions that people have about Africa. (Kari, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

**Kwesi:** Since I came here, because I live in this community now, I try to represent Africa, I try to be this African... it's a good opportunity to live in the American community, because we get the chance to show what Africa is. (Kwesi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

These statements point to the fact that the negative images placed the participants as inferior when they moved to the United States. Assuming an ambassadorial position becomes a strategy against the subordinate position they find themselves in the United States. They accepted their Africanness in order to debunk any negative stereotypes about Africa. Among some of the negative perception of Africa is that: Africans are poor and always in need of foreign aid, or Africans live on trees, and Africa as depicted in the famous cartoon, "Lion king." One of the participants, Kwabena, from Togo mentioned that he already knew how Africa was perceived and wanted to be the opposite by being an ambassador of Africa. Some of the participants were also shocked that some Americans did not know where Africa was and interpreted that as racism. Esi, a sophomore from Nigeria, felt she was in a constant discursive

battle to combat and prove to Americans that she is not primitive or uncivilized and that Africans are not hungry or in need of foreign aid. She said:

I had a mission after we were done in the class, everyone in the class will know that Africans are not dumb! (Esi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

The participants saw themselves as ambassadors of Africa with the sole purpose of educating Americans about the continent of Africa. They used interactional tactics by always asserting that Africa is not a poor continent as depicted in the media. They felt there were in a mental warfare to prove to Americans that they were better and civilized Africans. In retrospect, they had to negotiate their position as African immigrants who do not conform to the media depiction of Africa.

My experience as an African immigrant is equally daunting. During my first few months in the United States, my White American friends asked me questions such as: how do you cook in Africa, what do you eat in Africa, and whether we see lions or elephants everyday? I got very offended and thought they were blatant racists. But after living in the United States for a while, I realized that those questions were sometimes genuine questions of ignorance. I decided to let down my guard and answer those questions amiably. I negotiated my Africanness by accepting their ignorance and used the opportunity to educate them about my country. However, it made me feel inferior.

A few participants expressed strong national identity with their native country, especially the participants from Nigeria. When asked how they identify themselves, Esi, a sophomore majoring in biology said that:

**Esi:** If anyone ask me where I am from, I always tell them I am from Nigeria, I make sure, I pronounce my name the way it is and spell it the way it is. (Esi, Focus group interviews, February 17, 2012)

Another Nigerian, Yaa a final year nursing student also mentioned that,

**Yaa:** Even if I become an American citizen, I will still be the Nigerian. I cannot lose my Nigerian Heritage. (Yaa, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

Even though these Nigerians identified strongly with their home country, most of the participants exhibited strong identification with the continent of Africa .The strong identification with Africa does not only make it easy for my participants to identify themselves to their non-African friends. Rather, “becoming African” represents an ethnic marker within the racial discourse of the United States that reinforces a sense of transnationalism. Below, I explain this phenomenon with the concept of Africa as a diasporic home for African immigrants.

### **Africa as “Home”**

Africa is a source of validation for most African immigrants (Apraku, 1996). As transnationals in the United States, African immigrants use their identification with Africa as a source of validation to re-assure themselves of a better place free of racial prejudice and struggle. This goes against the assumption that African immigrants come to the United States to achieve a better life and economic freedom and possibly stay permanently in the United States. African immigrants face a constant reminder that they cannot be Americans even if they become naturalized citizens. Before I migrated to the United States for school, I was very excited because of what I had heard about the U.S. as a powerful country, freedom of speech, and most importantly everyone is treated equally. However, my expectations were shattered in the first few months in the United States through experiences of racism and discrimination. Since then, I

always imagine my home, which is free from prejudice and racial tension. In a conversation with some of my African friends and family, there is a constant reminder within the discourse of immigrant life that there is home and the United States is not home. The participants also echoed similar narratives: Kojo is a junior from Nigeria. He moved to the United States when he was 15 years old and now lives with his mother in Minneapolis. Even though Kojo didn't have much interaction with people from other African countries when he was in Nigeria, he now feels compelled to know people from other African countries because they make him feel at home. Yaa also moved to the United States with her mother when she was 14, she lived in Amsterdam for 6 years before moving to the United States. She is from Nigeria and is now an American citizen:

**Yaa:** That's why I think it's nice to have organizations like ASA [African Student Association], which helps [to] bring us back home. (Yaa, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

Yaw is a Nigerian who has been in the United States for 6 months. He is a graduate student in policy studies:

**Yaw:** The Africans here really helped me to feel at home you know. (Yaw, Focus Group Interview, February 17, 2012)

The concept of home is imagined not as a physical house for the family but also as a place of perpetual acceptance and a reminder of their ephemeral presence in the United States. In studies by Kofi Apraku (1991) and John Arthur (2000), they reported that most of the African immigrants who participated in their studies indicated that they would relocate back to Africa after staying in the United States for a while. Similarly, the participants in this study see the United States as not "home" but a transition in life, a place to attain education, national security,

or quick money. Although the concept of home can be explained as homesickness, for the participants it has changed from national allegiance to their home countries into allegiance to the continent of Africa. By creating a diasporic home, they are able to cope with their inability to assimilate into the White dominated America in contrast with White immigrants from Europe who can assimilate into the mainstream U.S society because of their racial privilege (Pierre, 2007).

Apraku (1991) wrote that African immigrants' desire to return to their home country is fueled by the constant racism that they face while in the United States. Bryce-Laport (1972) similarly wrote about the inequalities that Black immigrants face in the United States. Therefore, "home" becomes the place of cultural understanding, a place where they do not have to deal with racism or racial tensions. Below, I explore the participants' encounter with racism in the United States and how that contributes to the creation of a diasporic home during the process of ethnic identification.

### **"Racism Happens Everyday"**

Omi and Winant (1986) defined racism as the process by which "social, economic, and political forces determine the importance and content of racial categories and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meaning" (p. 39). I wanted to find out how my participants interpreted racism in the United States and how the experience shaped their ethnic identification process. It was evident that the creation of a diasporic home was a coping strategy against racism. Those who have been in the United States for more than three years were sensitive to racism and vocalized their dissent more than those who have been in the United States for less than 3 years. On the other hand, those who have been in the United States for less than 3 years were unsure what action could be classified as racism or discrimination and did not feel the need to do



anything about it. Further, in a discussion on what experience could be considered racism, the conversation ensued in a heated debate about sensitivity to race issues. Some participants felt some African immigrants were too sensitive about race issues and would treat any situation as racism even if they were at fault. It was evident that the participants would either avoid racism or could not determine if someone was being racist to them. Also, the male participants were more likely to ignore racism than the female participants.

There were inconsistencies in what could be classified as racism. Some of the participants were unsure if they had experienced racism, and others were more certain, if not entirely, about their experiences of racism. Several participants expressed their uncertainty to use the term racism:

**Yaa:** Okay, I experienced kinda an indirect racism (Yaa, Focus group Interview, February 10, 2012)

**Yaw:** Maybe I don't really care or recognize it. (Yaw, Focus group Interview, February 10, 2012)

**Kwesi:** I have encountered racism a lot of times. ... I don't think it's racism but it frustrated me. (Kwesi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

Some of the participants thought they experienced racism because they were Black and not necessarily because they were African, assuming that being African is not a racialized identity. Further analysis proved that the participants who have been in the United States for less than 3 years felt they were being discriminated against because they were Africans rather than because they were Black. They sometimes interpreted questions such as "do you live on trees" or "do you see lions everyday" in Africa as racist. Their idea of racism was variegated and complicated as they were still trying to assimilate into the race relations in the United States.

Esi, who has been in the United States for less than 3 years, gave this response to the question on encountering racism:

**Esi:** The thing is, I was the only Black person in the class. And my professor, she was very sweet, she is liberal, and she encouraged me in the class. But I had a mission after we were done in the class, everyone in the class will know that Africans are not dumb!  
(Esi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

Maybe she has not lived in the United States for long but her idea of racism was nothing close to what others perceived racism to be. Not to say that blatant form of racism is the only form of racism, but it was interesting how she swayed on racism questions between being African and being Black. Sometimes she made the connection between being Black and African but when she was asked whether she would like to be identified as “Black,” she refused to be identified as Black. She also mentioned that she wanted people to know Africans were not dumb, and earlier she said she was the only Black person in the class. Her answers still proved that she saw herself as target of racism either African or Black even though she was trying to separate African and Black.

For those who have been in the United States for more than 3 years, most of their blatant racist encounters happened when they were in high school. At the college level, they mentioned that their racist encounters were so subtle that it was difficult for them to clearly identify as racism. Some participants even did not want to acknowledge that they had experienced racism. Although some of them did not want to acknowledge that they have experienced some form of discrimination, they later referred to racism as one of the reasons why they want to bond with other Africans to make them feel at home. Racism is still a factor that posits African immigrants

as unwelcomed to “stay” in the United States. The following are the descriptions of the racism that they encountered.

Yaa is a junior; she is originally from Nigeria and is now an American citizen. She currently works at a group home where one of the clients that she takes care of called her a “nigger”:

**Yaa:** This particular client doesn’t have a mental disability [but] just a physical disability. I was walking down the hallway; he looked at me and said, “ What are you looking at nigger?” (Yaa, Focus group interview, February 10, 2012)

Yaa also lived in Amsterdam for 6 years and while there she experienced some form of racism. However, she said that she did not understand racism at that time:

**Yaa:** When I was in Amsterdam, I remember someone told me she didn’t want to hold my hand because I was a nigger, but I didn’t know back then what it was, the history of slavery or whatever, but I didn’t think anything of it. (Yaa, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

She explained that since she was not aware of the implications of racism, she did not care when someone called her “nigger” in Amsterdam. After learning the meaning of the term and the implications of racism, she said, “it gave me goose bumps.” She also expressed that sometimes even if there was an empty seat next to her on the bus, a White person would not sit next to her. Consequently, these experiences gave her a low self-esteem as a Black immigrant. Some of the participants come from upper middle class families in Africa, so an encounter with racism can challenge the way they view themselves. Kwaku is from an upper-middle class family. He is a first year undergraduate student from Ghana and a pre-med major. His father works for the UN

and his mother is a housewife. Kwaku has lived in 4 different African countries and he speaks French and English. He went to high school in Wisconsin before being accepted to pursue his bachelor's degree at Minnesota State University, Mankato:

**Kwaku:** Well for me it occurred in high school, we went to play soccer in communities that had limited contact with African people. Well, during sectional soccer game, I scored a goal and they started doing a gorilla and monkey stuff.

(Kwaku, Focus group interview, February 24, 2012)

In his response to the monkey mimicking by the hooligans at the soccer park, he said that he felt uncomfortable but there was not much he could do so he ignored them.

Originally from Nigeria, Kofi is a junior in college. He claims he is from St. Cloud because that is where he grew up and knows better than any other place. Kofi moved to the United States when he was 7 years old. He narrated a horrifying experience with two St. Cloud police officers, which he recorded on his mobile phone. He said that his friends and he were enjoying barbecue and playing soccer outside his friend's apartment when a police officer pulled in. The police officer told them to reduce the volume of their music, stop playing soccer, and also leave his friend's apartment. His friend took umbrage at the police officer because no one complained that his music was loud. Moreover, it was sunny outside and almost everyone was out enjoying the beautiful weather. Eventually the police officer wrote his friend a ticket for not obeying his orders. During the altercation, Kofi described the intense mood of the police officer:

**Kofi:** My words cannot express, the reaction was just blatant ferocity at us. The officer threatened to arrest my friend who was hosting us. (Kofi, Focus group interview, February 24, 2012)

After the altercation, he told the police officer he had recorded the entire conversation and he had no right to give his friend a ticket for just being outside. After a week, the police officer came back to apologize to his friend and also revoked the ticket. Racist encounters reminded the participants the fragility of their status in the United States. Even though Africa might have some form of discrimination, it is not based on the color of their skin.

For the participants who have lived in the United States for more than 3 years, it was evident that their perception of racism was clear and defined around their blackness and not so much around their Africanness. As Salomey, who have been in the United States for 5 years said that "...but the reality is that we do not treat people equally particularly based on their skin color, therefore we cannot take the color component out of it." Salomey's statement clearly underscores the immigrant's dream of coming to obtain freedom in the United States; African immigrants also have to deal with racism. Thus, how does their encounter with racism shape their ethnic identity formation process?

Negative connotations of Africa in the media and racism are some of the factors that drive the participants towards ethnic identification as African. As a result, forming relationship with people from other African countries becomes crucial. This helps strengthen social relations and their ethnic bond within the United States. The participants sought the friendship of people from other African countries who share similar racist encounters and cultural values. There is a need for the participants to re-create a sense of home with people who share similar racialized experiences, foods, morals, values and customs even though it might be different. Some of the participants expanded on this need:

**Kwesi:** I have the same feelings [as Africans], the difference that I used to see between myself and other Africans when I was in Africa is getting narrower. (Kwesi, Focus Group Interview, February 3, 2012)

**Kwame:** It is very important to me because first of all, you have the capacity to talk without thinking of crossing culture lines, it's very refreshing overtime. The most important thing is that you share the history and culture from other African countries. I think this is what the United States has given me. (Kwame, Focus Group Interview, January 27, 2012)

**Abena:** As at now, I think it's very important to be part of the African community because I tend to learn so much from them. (Abena, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

The need to bond with other African immigrants becomes a learning process for the participants as exemplified by Kwame who is a first year graduate student from Niger. He explained that the United States has enabled him to come in contact with other Africans. Also, Abena, a sophomore from Liberia said that she learns so much from other Africans. The participants are elated to get to know different African cultures and values. Even though they are put together as one people, they acknowledge their differences and it does not form a barrier to their Pan-African identity.

Becoming African sparks a new sense of belonging in the African community among the participants. There is a strong Pan-African identity among the participants since they moved to the United States. This is as a result of the experiences that drive them towards ethnic identification. First, they encounter the negative image of Africa in the U.S media, which prompts them to become ambassadors in order to debunk these negative connotations. Another

factor, which drives the participants towards ethnic identification, is the encounter with racism. Some of the participants did not want to acknowledge their experience as racism, even though they knew they had experience some form of discrimination. Subsequently, forming relationships with other people from Africa helped the participants cope with racism and other forms of discrimination. Overall, becoming African is both a drive to ethnic identification and a result of the inability of African immigrants to assimilate into the mainstream U.S. society.

Next, I explore the second category, becoming Black, which focuses on the development of racial identity.

### **Becoming Black, Resisting Blackness**

In addition to the experience of becoming African, the participants also explained how they became Black. In this section, I examined the process of Black racial identity development for the participants and the function of their ethnic identity in their racial development process. In the first theme, “I am not only African, I am also Black,” I examine how the participants developed racial consciousness. It was revealed that their encounter with racism and their encounter with African Americans reinforced their Black self-image. It became evident that, the participants encountered the meaning of their blackness through interactions with African Americans and White Americans. This resulted in the usage of identity negotiation strategies to distance themselves from their punitive stereotypes by accepting blackness only as a descriptor but not as an identity. Lastly, some of the participants resisted the term Black in its entirety claiming they could not separate blackness from its connotations therefore would not accept the term Black. Below, I analyze the participants’ perception of Blackness and then explore how the participants negotiated their position as Black immigrants in the U.S.

### **I Am Not Just African, I Am Also Black**

Among other processes of assimilation, developing racial consciousness convolutes African immigrants' seemingly smooth transition to the United States. For African and Afro Caribbean immigrants, this means entering a world "half blind with a naïve consciousness about race" (Shaw-Taylor & Tuch, 2007, p.78). During the interviews, I asked the participants about the most significant change they experienced since moving to the United States. The participants mentioned that apart from identifying as African, they now identify also as Black or Black African. In retrospect, being in the United States has reinforced their racial identity, and especially its relation to whiteness (Guenther et al., 2011). Migrating from the environment where clanism is the primary social stratification system, some of my participants had no idea what it means to be Black, let alone what it means to be Black in the United States. Some of the participants associated blackness to be African American and to be African was just ethnically different. Eventually, they felt their race became extremely relevant as they assimilated into U.S. culture. For example, the relevance of their skin color for job and school applications were at first incomprehensible. Rick is an undergraduate student from Gambia. When asked how he has changed since he moved to the United States, he said he now identifies himself based on his race:

**Rick:** One of the biggest changes for me [is] I started identifying myself based more on belief and race. (Rick, Focus group Interview, February 24, 2012)

Ken, who grew up in Togo and Benin, and Kari, who is from Ghana also shared similar experiences:

**Ken:** I grew up in Togo and Benin. In Africa, I am identified as either Togolese or Beninese but in the United States I am identified as a Black person. (Ken, Focus group Interview, January 27, 2012)



**Kari** :I really became aware of my race, when before I never really had to mention I am black. (Kari, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

These responses indicate that they developed their racial awareness after moving to the United States.

During the process of developing racial consciousness, the participants also encountered the meaning of blackness in the United States and reflected on whether or not to accept being labeled as Black. Pierre (2004) mentioned that “the responses of Black immigrants as they engage the racial hierarchy may come in the form of a rejection of the stereotypical African American cultural identity they are presented with and a foregrounding of their own complex histories and experiences”(p. 159). For the participants, encountering the connotation of blackness is what rendered the identification with blackness problematic. However, they were willing to assume an ethnic identity as African, which was not free of stereotypes either. Salomey said that she was comfortable with Black as a descriptor, but she rejected when someone identified her with the connotations of blackness:

**Salomey**: It’s [problematic] only when there is something added to it like... She is black that’s why she couldn’t do this or that...(Salomey, Focus group Interviews, January 27, 2012)

Eventually, understanding the meaning of blackness in the racial hierarchy of the United States resulted in the distancing of the participants from blackness (Pierre, 2004). Nonetheless, there is a constant reminder of their skin color and what it connotes because blackness precedes their Africanness. Becoming a Black person in the United States sparks a struggle that the participants have to deal with. They have to deal with being Black and African. The following statements confirm the tension between identifying with their ethnicity and race:

**Afia:** I really became aware of my race, when before I never really had to mention I am black. Sometime[s] I have to watch what I am doing because it will not be what Afia did but what a Black person did. I think [the] U.S. make[s] you more aware of your race. (Afia, Focus group Interview, January 27, 2012)

**Kwame:** There is always this awareness of your racial identity. Back at home no one called you a Black person. Everybody was Black. There were no racial inequalities. However, when you move to the United States, there is this need to fit in a category. You cannot be who you are but what category you have been placed. (Kwame, Focus group Interview, January 27, 2012)

**Kari:** There is also the issue of being Black, and being Black [is] being cursed, being Black is being undesirable, but obviously that's not true. But what I try to do is that, I am Black but I am not cursed and I am relevant to my society. Almost inadvertently, that's how I live my life. (Kari, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

There is a constant struggle to maintain an identity free of prejudice. Kari illustrated his knowledge of what being a Black person represents in the United States, but he tries to live differently from what blackness connotes. Kwame's statement assumes that there were no racial inequalities in Africa. However, since he moved to the United States, social capital is linked to racial category and his race does not have a bigger share of that capital. Also, some of the participants were not aware of the history of slavery and segregation in the United States. Slaves were taken from mostly West Africa and transported to the West Indies and the Americas. However, some of the participants were never taught about slavery in school in their native countries in Africa. A few participants learned what being Black in America meant through

parents and the media depiction of African American culture. However, the majority of the participants were oblivious of African American history prior to coming to the United States. Therefore, interactions with African Americans solidified their perception of blackness in America. Below, I explore some of the experiences that the participants had with African Americans.

### **“Anything That Wasn’t Them Was White”**

Rick mentioned that his experiences with African Americans have been a “roller coaster.” He said the first African American he met wanted him to smoke weed but he refused and that made him have a low point in his interaction with African Americans. He explained that he has met some good African Americans but others still labeled him as “White” because he dressed well and spoke fluent English. Rick also mentioned that he was teased for not putting his pants down. I found this intriguing, that some African immigrants were perceived as acting “White” as illustrated by Rick

**Rick:** Coming from Africa and dressing up, [my friend] used to tell me “you trying to dress like a White guy? And I was like being neat was being white? So in that respect I had a low point in my interaction with African Americans.... But I still continue to have some low frequencies as they label me as things that white people do. (Rick, Focus group Interview, February 17, 2012)

Kofi also mentioned that his African American friends bullied him in school for being too smart, therefore acting White:

**Mark:** I was beat up for being a triple stuffed Oreo just because I was focusing on education. Anything that wasn’t them was White. (Mark, Focus group Interview, February 24, 2012)

Jemima Pierre (2004) articulated the position of African American culture as “oppositional culture” to the status quo or Whiteness in America. Therefore, anyone who acts the status quo is perceived as acting white. The participants are from countries that were once colonized by Europeans. After independence, these African countries borrowed the religion, institutions, and morals of the Europeans. Consequently, most of the participants have a post-colonial identity, which is imbedded in the discourse of White superiority (Wright, 2004). Since race is mostly dichotomized as Black and White, not acting Black is seen as acting White even though that might not be the case for the participants. This could also be a consequence of ascribing an ethnic identity within a racialized group. For some participants, during the process of identification and assimilation, the binary between Black and White becomes conceptually problematic. While some participants try to emphasize their Africanness over their race, the dichotomized race relations in the United States do not allow them to escape racialization.

Other participants also described their experiences with African Americans:

**Yaw:** The only option for me to know African American culture was through movies. And they do not do a good job of portraying African American culture. I think the media does not do a good job of portraying African Americans. They are mostly murderers, thieves or the person that shot the guy. But you know I didn't really believe that because like I said, movie is not the best place to get any information. (Yaw, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

**Kwame:** For me, at a younger age I watched TV a lot and what I saw and heard influenced me. You see most Black people in rap videos and sports, so from what

I got I realized that some of the things that Black people strived in the United States was movies, sports and music. (Kwame, Focus Group interviews, January 27, 2012)

**Akua:** When I came here the first horrible experience was with an African American at the airport, he called my dad “hey ‘nigga’ get out of my way I am trying to get on the plane.” So I think many Africans have this perception about African Americans as being rude sometimes, the way they act. For example, if you go to parties, more than likely it is the African American who will start the fight. (Akua, Focus Group Interviews, February 24, 2012)

From these statements, it is evident that the perception of blackness is sparked through preconceived notions of African Americans and solidified through interaction with African Americans. When I first moved to the United States, I lived in Houston, Texas. Even though I had interactions with African Americans prior to moving to the United States, I had different experiences with some African Americans in Houston. Most of them were hostile, some were on drugs, and they represented anything that was an antithesis to my ideal way of upbringing; some even called me “dumb African.” At that moment, I started formulating my own ideas about blackness since African Americans were the only people I could equate blackness to. Apart from the experiences with African Americans, experience with racism also reinforced the self-image of the participants as Black. Next, I explore the impact of racism on the participants during the racial identity development process.

**“It makes me Think I am Black and Reminds me of What I am and who I am”**

When asked what kinds of impact encountering racism had on their self-image, most participants answered that it made them aware of their Blackness and reinforced their self-image as Black African. Kari, a graduate student from Ghana and Kwabena, an undergraduate from Togo, explained:

**Kari:** Maybe it's just my paranoia, I have not had any explicit encounters with racism but I have found myself in certain situations where [White] people's behavior towards me has implied certain racial mark. (Kari, Focus group Interviews, February 3, 2012)

**Kwabena:** I think it has reinforced the fact that I am Black and watch whatever I am doing. (Kwabena, focus group interview, February 3, 2012)

Encountering racism reinforced their Black consciousness. As illustrated by Abena, "it makes me think I am Black and reminds me of who I am and what I am" (Abena, focus group Interview, February 10, 2012).

According to Dubois (1903), Black consciousness is the realization of Black people of the need to rally together with his brothers and sisters to address their racial oppression. For the participants, racism did raise their racial consciousness but did not spark a new sense of belonging in the Black community. Rather, it drove them towards ethnic solidarity. According to William Cross (1994), African Americans' encounter with racism reinforces their self-image as a group targeted by racism during their Black identity formation process. The participants saw themselves as a group targeted by racism because of their skin color. However, there was no inclination to be part of the larger Black community comprising of African Americans.

Second, racism also caused a low self-esteem and frustration among the participants. The participants wondered why White people were not treating them as equal. Efua, a second

year graduate student from Somalia mentioned that White males mostly bullied her in high school; sometimes they pushed her against the wall and yelled, “go back to your country.” Efua said this made her feel so bad that she sometimes cried:

**Efua:** Sometimes I cried and cried, for me I could speak up but for some other girls it was hard for them to speak up. (Efua, Focus group Interview, January 27, 2012)

Kwesi is a sophomore from Burkina Faso; he talked about how he felt when a White woman refused to shake his hand at a reception that his friend had invited him to:

**Kwesi:** [My friend] was talking to a White lady and I went to say good-bye so I went [to] shake his hand to say good-bye. Since in Africa we shake hands, I wanted to shake hands with the White lady as well but she refused to shake my hand. I was very frustrated afterwards. (Kwesi, Focus group Interview, February 3, 2012)

Leni is a junior from Ghana, his mother is a lawyer and his dad is a businessman. He was an exchange student in a high school in New York when he experienced some form of racial prejudice. He mentioned that their basketball team went to play against another team in upstate New York. When they were done and he was getting on the bus, the bus driver would not let him get on the bus because he thought Leni was not from that high school, which was predominantly White and Leni was the only Black person in the team.

**Leni:** You know, at the time I was quite oblivious of race stuff, so I started blaming myself, why am I this way. (Leni, Focus group Interview February 3, 2012)

Racism was not a familiar form of discrimination which African immigrants would encounter in their home countries. Some participants experienced a cognitive dissonance because of the shift from ethnic consciousness to racial consciousness. It almost seemed like a dilemma and a struggle to understand why racism existed in the United States. They struggled to understand why someone would not like them because of the color of their skin. Personally, my first encounter with racism left a racial sticker on me, because I didn't understand why my skin color had become relevant and why someone would not like me because I looked different. Similarly, whatever form of racism the participants encountered, it made them frustrated and they began to ask questions about who they are as Black people in the United States. These experiences triggered the process of self-reflection that made the participants employ identity negotiation strategies to deal with racism. Below, I elaborate on how they reacted when they encountered racism.

#### **“I Don't Care about Racism” and “Racism Makes Me Work Harder”**

The participants became aware of the implication of their skin color through the interactions with African Americans and the experiences of racism. Most of them interpreted racism as the negative stereotypes that White Americans have about Black people, ignoring the structural, economic, and psychological damage that the system of racism can have on a target group. Rather, the participants saw themselves as different and tried to prove to White people that the negative racial stereotypes about Black people are not true for all Black people. There were two strategies used by the participants to help them deal with racist encounters: some of them ignored it, and others said it motivated them towards upward mobility.

First, the participants who have been in the United States for less than 3 years were more likely to ignore any form of racism than those who have been in the United States for more than



three years. For example, Kwesi from Burkina Faso who has been in the United States for less than 3 years went to a reception with his friend and a lady refused to shake his hand:

**Kwesi:** You should expect to see many of those situations. For the first time it's normal that I will feel frustrated or bad but after that, *I don't care* if you don't want to greet me because I am black. I am sure that what happened with the lady, I am pretty sure. I was the only black guy and she wouldn't shake my hand.

(Kwesi, Focus group interviews, February 3, 2012)

Even though some of them were aware of racism and its implications, these participants felt they were helpless and continued to ignore racism. Some of the participants even denied that their encounters were racist or discrimination. For example, Kofi who mentioned earlier that he was harassed by the St. Cloud Police Officers thought it was a joke and not racist even though he admits that the Police officer harassed them because they were Black:

**Kofi:** I think it's because we are black. I wouldn't call it quite as racist as he [one of the participants] would interpret it as. I didn't really feel like. It was more of a joke for us (Kofi, Focus group interview, February 24, 2012).

Kwaku, who also mentioned earlier that when playing soccer in Wisconsin, some hooligans in the crowd mimicked monkey dancing when he scored a goal, admitted that it was some sort of racism or discrimination. However, he does not think these people were racist:

**Kwaku:** I guess they had some problem with black people or African people, honestly I don't think they are racist, I just think that, it was funny to them I

don't think they were racist, even though it could have been the problem I cannot tell (Kwaku, Focus group interview, February 24, 2012).

Part of the reasons why these participants could endure any form of racism relates to the concept of diasporic "home." Africa as "home" is re-introduced as a place of solace where racist encounters are unlikely, a place that is always waiting for them. The idea of diasporic home makes them feel that racism is temporal, as illustrated by Kwabena:

**Kwabena:** Personally, It just tells me this is not a place for me, I have to go home. (Kwabena, focus group interview, February 3, 2012)

Kwabena mentioned that some of the racist encounters made him aware that the United States is not a place for him signifying his inability to assimilate in to the U.S.

Second, some of the participants felt racism motivated them to prove that they were better than the preconceived notions of blackness. Racist encounters urged them to do better in school or at workplace.

Ama is an Ethiopian student majoring in engineering and Kwame is a graduate student from Niger:

**Ama:** So for me, those kinds of experience motivate me to do well. (Ama, Focus group Interviews, February 17, 2012)

**Kwame:** [In] most of my classes, I was the only Black person and I realized most of my class students didn't expect much from me as a student. What I did was that, I took all those negative attitudes and used it as a fuel to motivate me to get to where I am. (Kwame, Focus group Interviews, February 17, 2012)

For these individuals, racism is a motivational factor that propels them to achieve greatness by struggling to prove that they are better Black people. In the case of Kwame, he acknowledges

the negative effects of racism, but he uses it as a fuel to motivate him to do better. While they do not enjoy facing racism, they did not mention the real effects of racism, such as losing jobs because you are Black, being shot at because you are Black, being arrested or stopped by the police because you look like a drug dealer (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). These participants view racism as motivation as if doing so would almost distant them from the structural damage that racism could have on them. Racism is both structural and institutional; it does not only encompass people's negative perception of Black people (Yancy, 2008). However, the participants seem to focus only on the menial effects of racism such as negative perception of Black people. Next, I explore some of the identity negotiation strategies that the participants use to assert their ethnic identity over their racial identity.

#### **“It Depends on How Black is Said or How You Use it”**

Dubois (1903) elucidated a phenomenon termed as the “double consciousness” whereby Black people see themselves through the eyes of White people. My analysis indicated that the participants saw themselves negatively as Black people in the United States as they perceived themselves through the eyes of Whiteness. Therefore, they negotiated their blackness by constantly defining and redefining themselves in social interactions by distancing themselves from the African American culture. Charles Horton Cooley (1902) coined the term, “Looking glass self” to explain how people form self-concepts through others' perceptions of them. Goffman (1959) mentioned that life may not be much of a gamble but interaction is (p. 243). For the participants, interaction with African Americans and White Americans made them understand their racial category. Racism with White America and the (un) identification with Black America pushed the participants towards self-identification between the boundaries of ethnicity and race. According to Omi and Winant (1986), the presentation of self in the United

States is trapped in the master status of race, and the negotiation of self is “based on a choice of ethnicity” (Pierre, 2004, p.145). For most Blacks, it must be “unremitting process of defining and negotiating social situations in America” (Shaw-Taylor and Tuch, 2007, p. 27). The participants asserted their difference as “African” and not African American through social interactions by constantly situating African as “better” than the assumed notions of blackness.

It emerged that knowing the connotations of Blackness is what initiated negotiation among the participants. Abena has been in the United States since she was eight. She talked about how she cannot hide her skin color, and therefore, everyone saw her as African American. She does not have an accent, so she had to distinguish herself as “African” frequently during interactions with her friends since they thought she was African American. This, she said becomes a problem for her in defining who she is in social interactions. This prompted me to ask them how they negotiate their blackness, as their Africanness is clearly unidentifiable until self-disclosed. Most of the participants answered that they had no problem with someone calling them Black or labeling them as a Black person. However, almost everyone mentioned that, being called Black became offensive when it is used with impunity. A South African woman opined this disquiet,

**Salomey:** If someone identified me as black, it’s totally fine. For example, black woman. It’s only when there is something added to it like...She is black that’s why she couldn’t do this or that. (Salomey, Focus group Interviews, January 27, 2012)

Being called Black was not problematic but being defined within the negative connotations of blackness was an issue for the participants. As one Nigerian man and a Liberian woman further explained:

**John:** If you call me black I guess I don't mind, it depends on how you say it. How you say it will predict how I will act. (John, Focus Group Interview, February 17, 2012)

**Abena:** It depends on how it is said or how you use it. (Abena, Focus group Interview, February 10, 2012)

It was revealing that blackness as a descriptor was acceptable to the participants. But the participants were not comfortable with the punitive stereotypes that came with being Black. Guenther et al. (2011) reiterated similar situation with East African immigrants. She explained that:

Few of the Africans in general, seem to have been committed to ideas of racial separation or to doctrines of racial hatred. Since they came from cultures where Black people were in the majority and where lives continued to be largely controlled by indigenous, moral and cognitive conceptions they had no reason to believe they were inferior. (p.6)

In order to separate themselves from their punitive stereotypes, the participants asserted their differences as not African American during interactions. Shaw-Taylor and Tuch (2007) defined this position as role distancing: "a process whereby Blacks actively attempts to separate themselves from their punitive stereotyped position in a racialized society or to refute their virtual blackness as they define themselves in a social encounter" (p. 29). During this process, the participants can distance themselves from blackness by situating themselves outside the confines of blackness, creating a better Black person in opposition to the African American culture. Mark articulated this position:

**Mark:** I think it's numbers game, when Africans come here, I think we are predisposed already to be a higher rank or a better economic status, better familial status...(Mark, Focus Group Interview, February 24, 2012)

**Akua:** Majority of Africans here have majors and most African Americans are undecided and the way we respect people and take education so seriously, because we are focused in achieving that goal, it looks different seeing someone who is black and doing well. (Akua, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

Mark makes an important statement that assumed that African immigrants are already predisposed to be at a higher rank and familial status than African Americans, considering the media representation of Africa as poor, war torn, and coupled with extreme famine. However, African immigrants are still predisposed to be better than African Americans who are in the United States with better schools, world economic system, and technology. Akua also made an assumption in her statement that insinuated that most African Americans do not have majors because they are not determined and do not take education seriously. These participants are in the process of creating "otherness," and the process of creating an other becomes wary when the other is depicted as inferior. Yaa, a Nigerian who is now an American citizen claimed that she thinks she has a leeway for upward mobility because she doesn't have an Afro-American name:

**Yaa:** I think we have it a little easier because we don't have that stereotypes that African Americans have. Also my name is not "sheniqua"... so I kinda have a leeway...(Yaa, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

Abena and Kwesi also made similar statements that implied that they do not want to be associated with the African American culture and felt bad they were assumed as African Americans:

**Abena:** It made me feel bad, they put me in the same group [as African Americans] ... (Abena, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

**Kwesi:** Makes me feel bad sometimes. Because they just put all Black people in the same pot and that makes me feel bad... (Kwesi, Focus Group Interview, February 24, 2012)

It is interesting to note that the participants were willing to know people from other African countries and to form a bond with them, but the statements above indicate that the participants did not have a strong urge to bond with African Americans who are historically Africans and share similar history of racism and the struggle for freedom and recognition. Even though African immigrants distanced themselves from African American culture, they still face racism and had to prove that they are civilized Africans as media representation of Africa is mostly negative. There is a continues cycle of racialization which still demeans and diminishes the status of all people of African descent and sadly African immigrants have become part of this cycle in the United States.

Although some of the participants partially accepted their new racial category as a descriptor, other participants resisted the term Black claiming it could not define them. In the following, I explore how some of the participants rejected blackness

**“I Don’t Like It When I Am Labeled as Black”**

This theme concludes the process of becoming Black. Some of the participants were clearly bothered by being labeled as Black and would avoid being called Black at all cost. Those

who have been in the United States for more than 3 years did not resist blackness as they thought it already defined them before they could define it. On the other hand, those who have been in the United States for less than three years were still struggling to understand their new racial category in the United States with all its connotations. As Naomi and John exemplified:

**Naomi:** I don't necessarily like it. I don't like it when I am labeled as certain thing or something. I think there is so much [more] to me. (Naomi, Focus Group Interview, February 24, 2012)

**John:** For me, I think society wants you to be Black by putting you in a box, that's why I stay away from all those words. (John, Focus Group Interview, February 10, 2012)

Some of the participants did not want to be labeled anything but their African identity due to the dominant cultural constructs of blackness. Naomi mentions that she does not want to be labeled anything "which does not define her," including blackness. John similarly mentioned that assuming blackness means you are put in a box. These participants resisted to be labeled as Black because they did not want to be associated with the connotation of blackness in the United States. They felt by resisting the term Black, they could define themselves. It was difficult for them to understand why someone would label them as Black before getting to know them. Not to say that African societies do not have classifications that place people in specific stereotypes, but in the context of U.S. racialized society, knowledge of the connotation of blackness deterred these participants from using blackness as an identifier. The development of racial consciousness overtime was fundamental for the recent immigrants to understand the race relations in the United States and their social and cultural implications.



In short, this category explored the development of racial consciousness of the participants. The first theme, “I am not only African, I am also Black” examined the process of racial identification in the United States. It was revealed that the participants used their ethnic identity as African to separate themselves from African Americans as the Black other. The second theme examined their experience with African Americans and racism. Third theme analyzed the identity negotiation strategies used by the participants to distant themselves from blackness, as their ethnic identity is not identifiable until self-disclosed. Some of the participants accepted the definition of blackness in its entirety, whereas others accepted the term Black only as a descriptor and distanced themselves from their punitive stereotypes of blackness. Last theme examined how a few of the participants resisted the term Black indicating that it could not define them.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the data provided information for understanding racial experiences of the participants in the United States. This chapter explained two major categories that the participants go through; “Becoming African” and “Becoming Black.” In becoming African, the first theme that emerged was “ A representative of Africa.” Most of the participants identified strongly with the continent of Africa, which I found interesting because there are several countries in Africa. When the participants moved to the United States, they began to identify as African and not by their nationality. I contended that this is a result of the racialization process where the participants are situated at the intersection of race and ethnicity within the racial discourse of the United States. The participants became aware of their subordinate position as Africans and adopted strategies to counteract the subordinate position. The first theme in this section explored

how the participants became ambassadors of Africa to deflate the negative reportage that Africa has in the U.S. media. Some of the participants asserted that they were ambassadors of the continent of Africa to show Americans what Africa is not. Another theme that surfaced in this category is the concept of Africa as home. The participants adopted this negotiation strategy to cope with racism and other forms of discrimination. The participants were able to create a temporal subconscious home in the United States out of their home in Africa. The reason for this phenomenon is that the participants decried a plethora of racism they had encountered. Even though some of them might decide to stay in the United States after their studies or already live in the United States permanently, there is always the concept of home in their subconscious minds. Home is the place where racism or racial tension is unlikely.

In the second category *Becoming Black*, the participants recounted the development of racial consciousness that labels them as Black or African American. The first theme, “I am not only African, I am also Black” explored how the participants gained Black racial consciousness. It became evident that racism solidified their self-concept as Black people. When faced with racism, some of the participants dealt with it amiably by ignoring the experience. Other participants understood racism as a motivational factor that enabled them to do better in school or their place of work, ignoring the structural damage that racism can have on their lives.

I discovered that during the process of developing racial consciousness, the participants encounter the implications of their subordinated racial status in the United States. The participants negotiate their blackness by either accepting or resisting their new racial category. Those who accepted their Black category only accepted it as

descriptor and negotiated their subordinated position by distancing themselves from their punitive stereotypes by asserting their ethnicity. Finally, some of the participants resisted the term Black, explaining that they did not want to be labeled Black because of the negative connotations of blackness in the United States. The process of racialization for these participants is unique and creates more contours within the discourse of race in the United States. In the following chapter, I conclude my study by addressing the implications of avowing an ethnic identity within a racialized society.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

My overarching question throughout the study was: How do African immigrants experience racialization and how do those experiences influence their self-concept as Black immigrants in the racialized U.S. society? I posed three specific questions, which guided my analysis. Below, I present the answers to my research questions, the implications and limitations of the study, and future possibilities.

#### **Research Question**

The first research question asked how sub-Saharan African immigrants experience race and racism in the United States. The results indicated that racism is an enduring factor that drives African immigrants to create a diasporic home outside the United States. I analyzed how they defined racism, and second, the effects of racism on their self-concept from a non-racialized society to a racialized society, and finally how they dealt with racist encounters.

First, it was evident that the participants who have been in the United States for more than three years could identify racism easily and were more sensitive to racism than the participants who have been in the United States for less than 3 years. Moreover, all the participants had some inconsistencies in their definition of their encounter with racism, especially those who have been in the United States for less than 3 years. The female participants were also more likely to show their disapproval of racist encounters than the male participants. Second, when asked what kinds of impact racism had on the participants, they acknowledged that racism reinforced their self-image as Black people in the United States. Even though the participants who have been in the United States for more than 3 years could identify racism easily, they still

downplayed and dismissed any act of discrimination against them. Some of the participants also reiterated that racism is a motivation that propelled them towards determination and higher academic achievement. Overall, it was evident that even though they maintained an ethnic identity separate from the African American culture, some of the participants viewed themselves as a group targeted by racism.

Second research question addressed how sub-Saharan African immigrants as post-colonial subjects negotiate their identities across racial, national, and ethnic differences. The participants identified themselves as African in the United States and not necessarily by their nationality. I realized that the strong identification with Africa reinforced a sense of transnationalism among the participants. By identifying as African, the participants were able to form a strong Pan-African identity cutting across ethnic and national differences. However, there was no sense of fluidity between African Americans and the participants. Some of the participants indicated that their experiences with African American were a “roller coaster,” and not entirely positive. Even though some of them mentioned they have met African Americans who have venerable characters, the majority of the participants described their experiences with African Americans as not positive. Their experience with African Americans reinforced their preconceived notions of blackness.

The final research question explored how sub-Saharan African immigrants experience, negotiate, and/or resist the process of “becoming Black” in the United States. I discovered that the development of racial consciousness helped the participants understand their new racial category. The participants experienced a cognitive a shift from ethnic consciousness to racial consciousness through the experience with racism and interactions with African/White Americans. As mentioned by one of the participants, Abena, “Over here, it’s all about your skin

color.” Some of them did not understand why they were being labeled according to the color of their skin, especially those who have been in the United States for less than three years. For most of them, becoming aware of “Black” as a racial category did not cause a concern. However, knowing the subordinated position of their race in the racial hierarchy is what prompted the participants to negotiate their racial category. Some of the participants accepted the term Black only as a descriptor but negotiated their Blackness during interactions by asserting their ethnic identity to distance themselves from African American culture. Others also avoided the term Black entirely, stating that the term could not define them due to the negative connotations associated with identifying as Black.

### **Implications**

This study produces numerous implications for scholarship on race, identity, and immigration. This study highlighted the racialized experiences of African immigrants and how their ethnic identity as African immigrants contributes/functions within the racial discourse in the United States. “Becoming African” and “Becoming Black” constitute two sets of processes that simultaneously shape the identity of African immigrants as they assimilate into the United States. From the study it became evident that there was tension between ethnic identification as African and racial identification as Black. To negotiate their subordinated position as Africans, they became ambassadors of Africa to debunk the media depictions of Africa. However, they did not feel the need to fight against racism or become Black ambassadors to resist the negative constructs of blackness. Instead, they distanced themselves from blackness. Also, the male participants were less likely to show their dissent to racism than their female participants. Yancy (2008) wrote that Black male body is viewed as a threat to the Eurocentric ideal. It can be explained that the male participants did not want to be perceived as a “threat” and refrained

from voicing out against racist encounters. Conversely, Black females could speak back because of the lack of threat they posed. This is a disturbing realization that engenders important implication for scholars who study race. To understand the impact of avowing an ethnic identity in a racialized society, I explore two sets of theoretical and practical implications this study presents: Africanization and the culturalist racist discourse, and re-thinking Pan-Africanism.

### **Africanization and the Cultural Racist Discourse**

One question that engendered through the study was: should the participants continue to define themselves as ethnically different given the formidable racist discourse in America? Hall (1980) wrote that race is the modality through which class, gender, nationality, sexuality and ethnicity are lived. So, what is the implication of emphasizing ethnic identity over racial identity? The participants identified themselves as “Africans,” even overriding their national identity as Ghanaian, Togolese or Liberian in the United States. But, how does this transnational ethnogenesis support the culturalist racist discourse of the post-civil rights America? I contend that Africanization of African immigrants in the racialized society perpetuates the subordination of Black people in general. First, it insinuates the cultural distinctiveness of African immigrants while keeping them from being a recognized as a part of American society (Pierre, 2004). Second, the discourse uses African immigrants’ success to claim that race is no longer an issue, supporting a colorblind ideology (Pierre 2004, Jackson, 2007).

Works of critical race theorists like Derrick Bell (1993) and Alan Freeman (2001) have explored the persistence of racism in social institutions and legal systems. Recent scholars like Asante Molefi (2005) and Bonilla-Silva (2001) have also examined the economic, political, social and ideological system of racism that is still being used to suppress Black people in the United States. I align this discussion with Balibar (1991) who defined contemporary racism as

“racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences” (p. 21). Chou (2008) asserted that cultural difference becomes the sites of containment that confines specific cultural groups to the status of “minor” and a foreigner (p. 233). Chou’s statement is in opposition to the accepted rhetoric of American multicultural society and democracy, which encourages acceptance of cultural difference. My participants’ drive to identify as “African” can be understood as a positive reinforcement of a Pan-African identity. Conversely, it can also be attributed to their inability to assimilate into mainstream American society and their resistance to being identified as Blacks in the U.S. In this case, African immigrants deploy their cultural differences to distance themselves from the existing racial hierarchy. Such culturalist discourse perpetuates racism under the guise of pan-African solidarity.

As a result, Pierre (2004) encouraged scholars to dismiss the use of African immigrants’ “cultural distinctiveness” to deny the prevalence of racism in the United States. I posit that the essentialist use of African ethnicity is constructed around the rhetoric of Black inferiority in general and not in celebration of the multiculturalism of U.S. society. For example, even though some of the participants were American citizens, they still yearned for the sense of Africa as home because of the amount of racism and social alienation they faced, indicating that their ethnicity could not facilitate total assimilation into the U.S. Within this culturalist racist discourse, becoming “African” situates the African immigrant as ethnic and almost not affected by race. Their ethnicity creates the “other Black people” to which African Americans can be compared and subordinated to assume their culture of poverty, while African immigrants themselves are situated as forever foreign. Consequently, to assume cultural relevance of a racialized group in a racialized society becomes questionable. African immigrants are praised



for their work ethic, determinism, and attainment of the American dream. However, within the complex nature of racialization process, how do you differentiate African from African American? In 1999, Amadou Diallo an immigrant from Guinea was shot 41 times by the White New York police officers as he reached to retrieve his wallet from his pocket. At that moment, the White police officers did not see a naïve African immigrant but a Black male body representing crime and danger (Yancy, 2004). By situating African immigrants as ethnic minorities, they are able to define themselves between race and ethnicity while the racial hierarchy stays the same. I contend that “Africanization” is a result of the racialization process through which Black immigrants from Africa affirm or transform their racial self-definitions (Omi & Winant, 1986). Nonetheless, these ethnic definitions do not overturn the negative connotations of blackness; it assumes the contemporary colorblind nature of American society while the system of racism stays the same (Bonilla-Silva, 2001).

From the study, it was noted that the participants tend to assert their Africanness as ethnic identity over their racial identity as Black people in an effort to maintain their ethnic solidarity and self-esteem. The participants were not fully aware of their strategic ethnic position and its impact on the larger racial discourse in the United States. As demonstrated by researchers like Jemima Pierre (2007) and Nancy Foner (1985), scholarship should focus on the forces of inequality that structure race and ethnicity in the United States. By focusing on the culturalist racism that works to strengthen racial hierarchy, researchers can understand the politics of identity that strategically places African immigrants within an ethnicity paradigm over African American culture.

### **Re-thinking Pan-Africanism: Diasporic Identity Politics**

From the study, it was evident that the participants adopted strategies to negotiate their subordinated position as African immigrants and as Black people. As a result, “becoming African” produced a strong Pan-African identity among the participants. Interestingly, the participants became ambassadors of Africa to debunk any negative stereotype about Africans but when they were developing racial consciousness, which is more visible than their Africanness, some of them rejected their blackness. As scholars in critical cultural studies and critical race studies, how can we harness these Pan-African sentiments to counter any form of racism? I argue that we need to politicize the Black experience of African immigrants by connecting their ethnic identity to their racial identity. To the extent that African immigrants’ ethnicity is racialized, Africanization of Black immigrants must be contextualized within the racializing force that subordinates people of color in the United States.

Chou (2008) mentioned that race relations in the U.S. are hierarchized by racial group’s performance in American capitalism. Therefore, race and ethnicity should be examined carefully to see how it supports the capitalist system (Chomsky 2003). African immigrants migrate to the United States for economic and educational purposes and most often do not want to meddle in the political and moral order of the United States (Jackson, 2007). They see the United States, as an “opportunity” coming from a third world country (Apraku, 1992). This becomes a problem in addressing issues of inequality and racism that affect the African immigrant community and Black people in general. However, since African immigrants acquire a strong sense of Pan-Africanism when they migrate to the United States, it can be used as a political tool in the interest of all Black immigrants. Even though African immigrants and

African Americans have cultural differences, their struggles are similar and Pan-Africanism can be the most effective ideology given its prevalence in the African immigrant community. Pan-Africanism should be re-conceptualized from its tactical usage by African immigrants to distance themselves from African Americans. In his article *Towards a Holistic View of Pan Africanism: Linking the Idea and the Movement*, Young (2010) wrote, “Pan African consciousness represents an identification with Africa much deeper than the isolated ideas about the continent itself” (p. 151). Pan-African consciousness is an awareness that members of African descent belong to a global African family. In addition, they create a sense of unity in struggle that helps them bond across racial, ethnic, and regional borders.

A consequence of creating ethnics within a racialized group is the provoking of intra-racial conflict. Guenther et al. (2011) mentioned that African immigrants are not the only immigrant group that has tried to distance themselves from African American culture. Early research by Roy Bryce Laport (1972) Mary Waters (1999), and Phillip Kasinitz (1992) indicated that immigrants from the Caribbean Islands similarly distanced themselves from African American culture to assert their ethnicity within the United States. Scholars like Mary Waters (1999) emphasized the cultural differences between the African American culture and Black immigrants culture to make assertions of African immigrants’ understanding of race and their marred relationship with African Americans. Nonetheless, I think African immigrants’ relationship with African American communities can be deconstructed using post-colonial theory and how it functions within a racialized group. African immigrants’ postcolonial mentality becomes the nourishing grounds for ideological conflict with African Americans. Their identity is shaped by a hybrid of religious, indigenous African beliefs and Eurocentric norms. On the other hand, African American culture was created in opposition to the status quo

in the United States (Pierre, 2007). My participants mentioned that some African Americans labeled them as White because of the way they dressed and talked. For the participants, anything outside Eurocentric norms could be interpreted as aberrant which might lead to conflicting ideas and goals between Africans immigrants and African Americans.

So how do we merge the struggles of African immigrants and African Americans to fight racism? Vickerman (1999) said that the relationship between African Americans and immigrants from the West Indies was a process of distancing and identification. He further explained that the process is not necessarily to avoid African American communities but to avoid a restrictive identity that they are not familiar with. I would like to focus on the concept of identification as a rhetorical strategy for Pan-African politics in relation to the larger Black identity politics in the United States. Bryce-Laport (1993) discussed the development of a Pan-African identity among Caribbean immigrants in the U.S. He argued that Black immigrants bond along racial, regional, and ethnic lines because of the way they are branded upon arrival to the United States. I contend that African immigrants have a strong Pan-African identity because of the way they are branded as “Africans” and subordinated. As a counter-racist pedagogy, I argue that it is essential to politicize the Black experience of Black immigrants in the United States as the participants’ experience and my experience ascertains a paradigm of renewed Black subjectivity. By focusing on the similarities of our struggles and historical background, Pan-African identity can feed into the larger Black identity politics and not just maintaining an ethnic solidarity in the United States. By including the diasporic voice, Black immigrants join the fight against the dominant cultural construct of blackness and racist structures that continues to oppress people of African descent with benign policies and procedures that advance the interest of White elites. Downplaying the ethnic difference and focusing on racial inequalities,

African immigrants can use their Pan-African identity as an anti-racist discourse rather than an exclusionist ideology.

According to Mostern (1999) “all politics can be described as an engaged relationship between the social location of a particular political actor and the social totality in which their action takes place” (p.6). Black immigrants have the same social location as African Americans; however, their interest in Black politics is not the same. African immigrants should focus on vocalizing their racist experience and expand the voice of African immigrants by understanding their experience as unique but in relation to the entire Black experience. Even though African immigrants might enjoy upward mobility by ignoring racism or using it as a fuel for motivation, their descendants might not enjoy a similar status as they eventually get assimilated into the U.S. Black population. In addition, the assertion that African immigrants are the model minority cannot be the bases to assume that all African immigrants and their descendants will have upward mobility in the future. Zhou (1997) wrote that “the racial status influences the social adaptation of immigrant in ways closely connected to family socio-economic factors” (p. 988). Zhou found out that race is connected to the social adaption of immigrants. Also, the opportunities that maybe available to immigrants upon arrival to the United States may encourage socio-economic development, but their descendants might not enjoy similar opportunities. Charles Hirschman (1983) also argued that “whereas ethnicity is now a symbol of cultural and political differentiation... for some minorities, especially Blacks and Puerto Ricans most of the barriers to achievement are still in place” (p. 415). Racism is undeniably a difficult fight as it spurs in different forms. Therefore, to continue the fight against racism Black immigrants should be engaged in identity politics to voice out the discrimination and the inequalities they encounter in solidarity with African Americans.

Just as Pan-Africanism was used in the past to rally all people of African descent against European and American imperialism, it needs to be re-conceptualized to address the current level of racism and imperialist takeover of Black bodies for capitalist purposes. By focusing on the discourse that structure race and social status in the United States, scholars can understand the position of African immigrants and the implied consequences of creating ethnics within racialized group.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study must be identified. First the participants were all students from Minnesota State University, Mankato. These students are from mostly upper middle class or middle class families in Africa between the ages of 18-27. It is possible that their experiences might be entirely different from African immigrants who have not had the opportunity to be in an academic environment.

Second, my position as an African immigrant might have prompted my participants to cater their responses to my presumed expectations. Even though the participants felt comfortable with me to share most of their experiences, it might also have prompted certain bias responses that they thought would make me happy.

Third, their responses as a group could invariably affect the answers they gave me. Maybe a one on one interview would have provided a different response since they would have had the chance to express themselves without thinking of someone else might say. Even though I tried to have an open discussion so no one would feel they couldn't speak out, I still think personal interviews would have given me in-depth information about their racialized experiences.

## **Future Research**

The purpose of this study is to delve into how African immigrants experience racialization and how that affects their assimilation process in the United States. Therefore several possibilities for research can be extracted from this current research. My studies focused on African immigrants in college setting. Future research should explore the experiences of African immigrants who are not in an academic setting and are working full time to be able to make a comparison between the racialized experience of students and non- students.

Furthermore, future research should focus on how the different subgroups within African immigrants experience racialization. This study identified certain negotiation strategies that African immigrants use to resist or accept the process of becoming Black such as creating a diasporic home because of racism and using their ethnic identity as a social distance from African American culture, future research should focus on how for example African immigrant women who have no education experience racialization or racism and how can African immigrant gay men create a diasporic home in a home country that reject their sexual orientation. Future research should also focus on whether second and third generation African immigrants still identify with their African heritage for negotiation purposes.

This research has provided abundant information that I least expected. This study was particularly exciting because I realized that my experience as a Black immigrant was not unique. Subsequently, I have decided to embark on more research to help African immigrants understand their new racial category and eventually have a voice in civic engagement. I have acquired much knowledge with regard to racism, discourse, and racial identity development. I

hope this research continues the conversations on Black immigrant experience in the United States.



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## **Appendix**

### **Informed Consent Form**

You have been invited to take part in a research study being conducted to learn more about the experiences of African immigrants and race. This research study is being conducted by Godfried Asante under the supervision of Dr. Sachi Sekimoto from the Communication Studies Department, Minnesota State University, Mankato. The responses that you give will contribute to the overall knowledge in the experiences of African immigrants and their racial experience in the United States.

If you agree to be in this research study, you will answer discussion questions about your life in the United States and your experiences with both African Americans and White Americans. The focus group will take about one and half hours to two hours to complete and you also agree to be videotaped.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and anonymous. You will write your name on the authorization page only. You may refuse to participate, skip any question or withdraw at any time without penalty. Non-participation will not affect my grades or academic standing.

If you do decide to participate, you will sign and detach both consent forms, keep one form for your records, and hand the other form to the person administering the focus group before starting the focus group. If you do participate in the focus group, it is possible that you may encounter discomfort talking about your personal experiences with race or hearing about others views on race. If this occurs you may contact the Minnesota State University counseling department at 507-389-2214.

Your original name will be withheld from the transcription of the focus group interviews and in the final report. The information gathered from the focus group will be used only for the purpose of this study. Information from the focus group will be transcribed and saved in the Communication studies department under the supervision of the principal investigator. Only the principal and secondary investigators will have access to the videos and the transcriptions

After each focus group interview, the secondary investigator will transfer the videotaped session into a Compact Disk and erase the original video from the camera. The secondary investigator will transcribe the videotapes. The secondary investigator will transcribe the session on his personal computer with a security password. The secondary investigator will store the transcriptions on his computer for the duration of the study until his thesis is completed (expected May 2012).

The secondary investigator will erase transcriptions from his computer once his thesis is completed. The CDs and hard copies of transcriptions will be stored in the locked file cabinet in the main office of the communication studies department (AH 230) for three years after the

completion of the study. After the three-year period, the data related to the study will be destroyed. Transcriptions would be shredded and information on the CDs will be deleted. Through the written consent document and the oral introduction, the researcher has explained this study to you and answered your questions. For questions about your right as a research participant, you may contact the MNSU regulatory compliance coordinator at: (507) 389-2321

If I have any questions, concerns, or wish to report a research-related problem, I should not hesitate to contact:

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Please read and sign the following:

In consideration of my participation in this research and on behalf of myself, my heirs and assigns, I release and hold harmless the State of Minnesota, the Minnesota State University, Mankato and their officers, agents, volunteers and employees from liability and responsibility for any claims against any of them by reason of any injury to person or property, or death in connection with my participation in this focus group.

I have carefully read, and have had this study and the terms used in this consent form and their significance explained to me. I am fully competent to sign this consent form. I understand that I am to keep one of these consent forms for my files and hand the other one to the focus group coordinator.

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. How do you identify yourself and why?
2. How has the way you identify yourself changed since you came to the United States?
3. How important is it for you to be part of African community in the United States and how has it changed overtime?
4. Have you had any experience with racism? If so, please describe your experience.
  - a. How did your experience with racism shape the way you think about yourself?
  - b. How do you feel if someone called or categorized you as black?
5. What was your perception of African American culture before you moved here?
6. How would you describe your experiences with African Americans?