Immigrant Generations, Media Representations, and Audiences

Edited by
Omotayo O. Banjo

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This volume is dedicated to families separated by borders or policy and to every hard-working immigrant who makes America better.

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I would also like to honor the scholars before me who laid the groundwork for the study of ethnic media and transnational audiences and who continue to engage in scholarship centered on questions of immigrant and bi-cultural identities. I write this in appreciation for my colleagues who served as sounding boards and gave their feedback. To my mentors, I am indebted to you for the time you take to encourage and inspire my work.

For my family, my mother, father, sister, husband, and daughter, Morayo AdeYara, I am grateful. Thank you for sharing your stories with me and laying a foundation which inspired me to tell my own.

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interactions, as well as audiences' exposure to and engagement with mass media, including digital, news, and entertainment media. Inherent in his conceptualization of this work is a recognition that issues of class, gender, race, ability, geographic location, and sexuality meaningfully impact these relationships. Stamps's research has appeared in several published books, including *Films as Rhetorical Texts: Cultivating Discussion about Race*, *Racism and Race Relations*, and in peer-reviewed journals, including *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, the *Howard Journal of Communications*, and *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. Stamps is the inaugural recipient of The Claudine Michel Advocacy and Excellence Award and was recently awarded the Louisiana Board of Regents OER Common Faculty Cohort Program Award and the One-For-All Public Relations Classroom Project Grant. His research has been supported by the Congressional Black Caucas, E Pluribus Unum, Blue Cross and Blue Shield, and The Social Science Research Council, to name a few. He has presented at multiple conferences, including the National Communication Association, Broadcast Education Association, and Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture conference. A former publicist and grant writer, he also holds a BA from Columbia College Chicago and an MA from California State University, Northridge.

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CHAPTER 1

Becoming Black: An Introduction to Immigrant Generations, Media Representations, and Audiences

Omotayo O. Banjo

She sat across from me, assured. We discussed many things that afternoon as I had with previous prospective students, but this conversation was slightly soul-baring. While sharing her experience at an HBCU which included connecting with African international students from who she sought to learn about her connection to the Continent, she informs me "you are not part of the diaspora." Admittedly, I was caught off guard. I ran through my mental library to offer her a definition of diaspora of which I was sure I was part. She shared her view on diaspora based on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Yes. I wasn't that. Though I knew there were definitions that accounted for my experience, I found myself triggered. After burrowing through the name-calling in kindergarten, the inquisitions of my identity in high school and the confrontations of my blackness in graduate school, I had established myself as a

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scholar of Black Entertainment. I was Black too, right? Or what did that mean? But now, sitting at the table with my cod fish sandwich in hand, I felt like the 4-year-old on the first day of school tensing up as my teachers struggled to call my name. The American non-American girl.

This short, yet convicting conversation was the catalyst *to Immigrant Generations, Media, and Audiences.* Per her definition of diaspora, I had interpreted that I was not Black American, but *something else*. Of course, she did not mean to insinuate that I was not Black, but it was the first time in a long time that I had contemplated my racial positionality as a child of immigrants born in the United States and having never traveled to my parents' homeland, Nigeria. While I had grappled with my identity as a Black woman in America at varying stages of development, I had never wrestled with being both an insider and outsider. Black American, *but something else.* This volume speaks to the inbetweeness experienced by many Americans who are either immigrants or the first to be born in the United States. Using my personal story as a starting point, I share my experience being in between two cultures, encountering and later internalizing American racial codes, using media to navigate my racialized interpersonal interactions, and finally being able to locate myself in stories told by diasporic creatives. I consider my own racial positionality and experience as a second-generation American of Nigerian descent.

In my previous edited volume, *Media Across the African Diaspora*, I note that there are no concrete definitions of diaspora as some define it by those only descended from the slave trade and others by migration patterns of people groups. Clark (2008) argues that the growing migration of Africans to the Americas reconceptualizes and adds depth to terms like "African-American" when describing first- and/or second-generation Americans who blend the culture of their ancestral and domestic homes. Similarly, Okpalaoka and Dillard (2012) address Black Americans as (African) Americans making the argument that though Black Americans are geographically distant from the African continent, they are still genetically African and Africa is their ancestral land; thus the two groups are inextricably tied, yet their psychosocial development varies.

Okpalaoka and Dillard (2012) delineate the differences between Black Americans as Africans who came to the United States by force and Black immigrants from those who moved to the United States to attain a better life. For Black immigrants, their emigration experience and orientation to US culture are different for many reasons—culture shock, language barriers, and intra-racial tensions. For many Black immigrants, ethnicity or

culture is central to their identity; thus, identification to racial categories is *learned*. Furthermore, tensions between Black Americans and Black immigrants often arise because of perceptions of superiority—whether internalized or ascribed which has led to the ADOS (American Descendants of Slavery) movement (Stockman, 2019). Although the diasporic journey and acculturation experience of each group is different, Black immigrants are not excluded from the experience of blackness and otherness in the United States (i.e. discrimination, prejudice). In addition to (African) Americans (Black Americans) and foreign-born Americans (Black immigrants), children of African immigrants in the United States also grapple with complex identities. Often second-generation Americans (sometimes referred to as biculture or hybrid kids) feel out of place having to manage the tensions between their families, culture, and their nationality while also legitimizing their heritage and American identity.

For immigrants, race and ethnicity are separate, yet coexisting. For American-born children of immigrants, in particular, racial classifications may feel especially confusing. As noted by Awokoya (2012), "African immigrant youth often face many complex identity issues. In some circles, the authenticity of their African identity is questioned; in others, their American experiences are undervalued." Thus, as a hybrid, growing up in the DMV (Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia) area among Nigerians, attending majority Black American schools, and engaging with my social world as a person with dark skin and a funny name, I find myself navigating many layers of self which were not necessarily organic, but learned. As I reflect on the contextuality of my racial position, I turn to music, television, and film to unpack my cultural adaptation and adoption of my Black American identity.

As there are multiple layers of self, sometimes coherent, other times in conflict with one another, an investigation and narration of the self can be what Boylorn (2008) describes as "messy, contradictory, and complicated" (p. 415). In Boylorn's (2008) autoethnography, the author examines her interactions with representations of Black women. The author emphasizes the significance of possessing and sharing a critical gaze which resists dominant (**read** White) narratives and ways of knowing. Boylorn states, "Black women must be willing to critique and challenge popular media images in contrast to their lives and experiences" (p. 415), in order to offer realistic portrayals of Black womanhood or of interest to me, blackness. Navigating through the multiple layers of my identity as a second-generation American, I find myself contemplating the extent to which her call applies

to someone at my intersection of blackness. I share my story to offer a perspective which accounts for how racialized Black immigrants may engage with entertainment, especially considering the dearth of scholarship on media and acculturation among Africans compared to Latinx, East, and South Asian communities.

The aim of this volume is to collect scholarship on the representation of the immigrant experience in media, especially by diasporic communities, as well as record personal narratives from second-generation Americans about their interactions with media representations of their community. This volume is for the immigrants and their children who can appreciate, and at times critique, the nuances in racial identity that immigrant creatives bring to the table. This volume is also for the larger historical framework of our nation which records the work and impact of narratives told by people who have been pushed aside in the telling of the American story. We, too, sing America.

I was looking for myself on television, but didn't realize it until I didn't see myself. Looking back, I realize the first time I saw some version of myself was in the four episodes Rosalind Cash appeared as Dean Hughes on the series A Different World. Four appearances, across three years. A silver-haired, long locked, regal, sophisticated dean at the fictional Hillman College. She made quite the impression on me. The image of an erudite African American woman with hair texture like mine must have superimposed itself into my mental framework of myself. I ended up being a professor at a primarily White institution proudly wearing my long locks. But even as I look at her now, I don't see myself.

Between a Place and No Place

With migration trends growing across the globe, there is a need for literature which adequately explains the contextual nature of identity formation among immigrants, their children, and future generations. African immigrants, especially, are growing rapidly in the United States and achieving significant success in various labor markets (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). While economic opportunity and stability are likely on the forefront of immigrants' minds, their own psychosocial and cultural development as well as that of their children are an afterthought, but one that should be explored.

Acculturation research helps to explain the process through which foreign-born individuals learn to cope and adjust to being in a country

different from their home. According to Berry's (1997) acculturation theory, an individual's adaptation or assimilation to a host culture is largely impacted by the strength of their "orientation" toward the host and home country. Scholars generally agree that immigrants in host societies either choose to identify with both cultures (integration), connect with their heritage culture, choose their national identity, or engage in some form of identity paralysis (Berry et al., 2006). Further the decision to integrate or not is largely dependent on one's social networks. For example, researchers found that Chinese American youth's ethnic identity was determined by how many American compared to Chinese friends they had (Mok et al., 2007). Ward and Geeraert (2016), however, assert that the traditional model of acculturation does not account for the ebb and flow of identities among immigrants. Further, these dynamics become complex as we consider the identity formation and experiences of immigrants who came as children or were naturalized (first-generation), immigrants who came as teens (1.5 generation), or children born in a host country to adult immigrants (second-generation).

Haller and Landolt (2005) describe immigrant generations as transnational communities whose identities exist and are transformed within a "time-space compression"—an elimination of geographic borders facilitated by communication technologies which makes it easier for migrants to maintain connections to their home of origin. As such, each generation has an opportunity to develop "transnational ways of being and belonging." Each of these groups experiences different stressors which impact their identity, and immigrant youth especially often feel tensions between their ancestral culture and their host culture (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Moreover, their cultural identities are often questioned by in-group members (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001) which could make it difficult to commit to their home culture. Concurrently, immigrants and their children also face discrimination from their host culture. Such tensions may present challenges to how they define, negotiate, and locate themselves culturally.

Whereas Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1974) helped to explain the ways in which social groups form to clearly delineate between insiders and outsiders, Turner's Self-Categorization Theory (1999) explains the navigable contexts individuals engage to manage the various layers of identity which coexist. Immigrant children find themselves in a unique position where they are not either *inside* or *outside*, but in both places and neither at the same time. Though not directly targeting immigrants

and their children, Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) implies that immigrant children have the luxury and burden of choosing the aspects of self which are most salient in a given context. For example, when among Black Americans, an African immigrant might identify more strongly as an African; however, when among White Americans, that person might be hyperaware that they are in fact Black too.

Phelan et al.'s (1991) multiple worlds framework may help to explain how immigrant youth and their children navigate their competing contexts: family, school, and peer culture. According to the multiple worlds framework, children learn to adapt to the distinct demands of varying spaces which are "governed by different values and norms." Whereas acculturation theorists contend that individuals experience adaptation for different settings, Phelan et al. (1991) propose there are different levels of congruency between a child's home life, school life, and peer relationships which might induce identity conflicts within a cultural hybrid.

Sometimes referred to as a bicultural identity, hybrid identities have been defined as a mixture of two or more cultural identities. While significant to understanding identities at the cultural intersections of home and host countries, the concept of hybridity is not without critique. Pindi (2018) argues that hybridity is lacking in a clear definition, describing it as "the obligatory celebration of cultural difference and fusion." Linking hybridity to globalization trends which see technology and people as cultural embodiments, Kapchan and Strong (1999) critiqued that an inadequate definition of the term "threatens to dissolve difference into a pool of homogenization" (p. 240). Though hybridity could lead to cultural erasure and may demand meaningless commitments to diametric cultures, another perspective considers the nuances that being a cultural hybrid brings to an individual's perspective as well as their needs for identification. Habecker (2017) proposes a theory of hybrid assimilation which she defines as "a fluid process of creating new identities by merging together aspects of immigrant cultures with American cultures at the boundaries between social groups" (p. 59). Perhaps, as a final destination an immigrant or their US-born children find themselves smack dab in the center of geodemographic borders and systemic racial boundaries and as such exist both within and apart from these constraints.

Born of two Nigerian immigrants, I grew up in a household that was distinguished by the customs of a land I wouldn't visit for 33 years. The language spoken in my home was different. My friends all had names like mine.

On occasion we wore clothes that were different which often required assistance whether it was tying my buba (skirt) or my gele (headdress). The foods we ate were different from those presented to me in the cafeteria in school.

The smell of fried plantain titillating my nostrils takes me back to Tyler House Apartments in Northwest Washington DC where I grew up. When I heard the crackles of the oil in the pan, with the air vent blowing, I knew we were going to eat dodo. As a four-year-old, I found much pleasure in masticating the salty banana-like starch between my small. Whether with fried egg, ewa agoyin (stewed beans), white rice, or fried rice, dodo was always a welcomed and beloved delicacy on my plate at home.

This time mommy complimented it with joloff rice when she packed my dinner for after school day-care. I was likely thinking about it all day while in school, while in the cafeteria, making sense of the lunch meat on my plate, and trying to figure out how to open my carton of chocolate milk. Ms. Brown, my baby-sitter lived down the hill from my elementary school so it was an easy walk to her house. Plastic bag in hand, I walked down the hill, waited for the safety guard's signal and made it to her house safely.

Entering Ms. Brown's house, I would often be hit with a scent, her daughter Christine told me were pigs' feet or 'chitlins. It seemed strange to me, though I would later learn it was a popular dish for many Black families in the south. Early evening drew nigh, and it was time to eat dinner. As Ms. Brown warmed up my food, the smell of tomatoes, onions, and chicken bouillon bid the smell of chitlins to a duel. Then the sweet smell of the fried plantains overpowered them both. My mouth was watering.

I remember the joy I felt as I uncovered the Tupperware. Dodo was as common to me as a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for the other kids. I gathered the rice and the dodo in my spoon, took one bite and felt at home. This was soon interrupted when Darnell, Ms. Brown's teenage son found a seat next to me and asked, "What's that?"

"Dodo!" I exclaimed.

"Doo doo?" he asked in jest, referencing the barbaric African stereotype. I corrected him.

"Can I taste it?" he asked. I paused. Dodo wasn't something I typically shared, but in the moment, I wanted to invite this American into my Nigerian world. After being taunted most of the day in school for my name, for an accent that I couldn't hear, and being asked questions about a continent I had never visited, this was my opportunity to share the goodness of my culture. He is going to taste it and wish he was Nigerian.

After one bite, Darnell spit the plantain out onto the floor.

His rejection of this delicacy was personal. My world and his could never collide, I thought. I didn't fit here. I never brought plantains to Ms. Brown's house again.

* * *

Finally, after dreaming since graduate school, I am a Fulbright scholar in Nigeria. I am walking on campus in Ota observing three Nigerian students, gisting and laughing. One exclaims "You dey chop life o!" I understand by the tone of her expression, their smiles, and their responses that she is edifying her friend in a jocular manner. I discern the internalized spiritual belief in the power of the tongue and I critically assess the ways humor is being used to cope with a perhaps unfavorable reality. We lock eyes and smile. I find myself wanting to rejoice with them, but realizing that though I understood, I could not speak the vernacular, even if it was English. My accent alone was a marker, an indicator that I am not part of them. For sure they would assume I was an outsider. And they would be right. I didn't fit there.

Becoming Black

Whereas social identity theory discusses the extent to which some groups are devalued, Ramasubramanian and Banjo (2020) have argued that the theory does not adequately explain the systemic ways that racial categories are constructed which leads to the minoritization or devaluation of some groups over others, especially immigrants. Referencing Gans' work, Haller and Landolt (2005) explain the ways in which immigrants' cultural identity is impacted by an environment framed in a "European-derived postcolonial society" (p. 1187). As a result, just as a French woman arrives on American soil and becomes White and will likely have a more pleasant social experience, an African arrives and becomes Black and may have an unpleasant experience.

Cross' (1995) Nigresensce model suggests Blacks in America go through five stages of identity development. Beginning with the pre-encounter stage, Cross argues that we are first unaware of our racial identity. Through an encounter stage, we come to a realization of contrast and difference and choose to identify with or reject the Black racial category. During the immersion stage, Cross argued that we invest in discovering aspects of our Black racial self. In emersion, an individual defines for

herself what blackness is and embraces the multiple ways in which to express Black racial identity. Finally, during the internalization stage an individual holds Blackness in a positive light, cultivating identities rooted in African ancestry.

Whereas Cross' theory applies to descendants of enslaved Africans, it does not adequately explain the process of racialization for Black immigrants and their children. As Benson (2006) contends, research examining the racial identities of Black immigrants fails to consider how the process of racialization varies by native origins. Campbell (2017) claims that making people of color a monolith is "an erasure of cultural identity, experiences, and the fluidity of racial and ethnic identity development." Reflecting on his experience as an international student, Campbell questions Cross' "pre-encounter" stage in his own identity development explaining that his lack of awareness of race had less to do with colorblindness and more to do with coming from a place where race was not a concept. Though he was reluctant to identify as Black given his discouragement about the treatment of Black people, Campbell (2017) later entered an internalization stage writing, "As I became conscious of my race, I was not struggling with feelings of anger, frustration, shame, or confusion…I was not angry or frustrated with myself; I was angry and frustrated with how race and racism are perpetuated in all aspects of U.S. culture, institutions, and beliefs. I was also angry and frustrated by the continued silencing of my Jamaican identity" (p. 46). Campbell found himself feeling like he needed to choose between a racial category and his ethnic identity. For children of immigrants the options are much more expansive, having to choose between or navigate racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.

Berry et al.'s (2006) model of adaptation suggest that immigrants generally choose to integrate, separate, or remain non-committal but does not seem to account for the psychological impact of the minoritization and marginalization of some identities in societies for which racial hierarchies are prominent. Waters' work (1994, 1999) has suggested that second-generation Black immigrants likely choose to identify as African American, ethnic American, or immigrant. In her work examining generational immigrants, Awokoya (2012) contends that contemporary immigrant youth may subscribe to White mainstream middle class, urban underclass, or ethnic community. In her interviews of African immigrants, Habecker (2017) found that while some in her sample chose to separate from their ethnic heritage, there was also some ambivalence with their identification with Black Americans, not necessarily because of any disparaging attitudes

toward Black people, but because of a shared racial experience based on skin color.

Using the multiple worlds model, Kiramba et al. (2020) examined the ways in which Ghanian-born immigrants in the United States made sense of their identities and navigated their social worlds. The researchers found that while their sample felt motivated by the duality of their family and school life, students in their study experienced racial conflict with peers at school. These findings resonate with Awokoya's (2012) exploration of 1.5 and second-generation Nigerians where diasporic immigrant youth shared stories of favoritism by White teachers which further deepened the divide between them and Black American students. Nigerians in her sample shared they endured much name-calling such as the infamous "African Booty Scratcher" which suggested that African people were uncivilized and unclean.

My parents told me a story: Once I came home in tears. They sat me down to ask me what was causing my grief. According to them, I asked them to change my name, perhaps to something American.

"Why do you want to change your name?" they asked.

I explained that the kids at school were making fun of me. They would call me Old McDonald or Oklahoma. I don't quite remember being as sorrowful as my parents said I was. Perhaps this is a testament of the great work they did to counter the narrative that was beginning to form in my mind about my name, and my worth. My father explained the meaning of my name to me: A child who brings joy, he said. My mother explained the story behind choosing my name. My grandfather, Olutayo, wanted to name me after him, but my mother, wanting to honor him while giving me a less masculine name chose to call me Omotayo. My father instructed when the kids tease me again, I should tell them the meaning of my name and ask them the meaning of theirs. That day I felt Nigerian. There was a language that explained my name: Yoruba. There was an attachment to an ancestor I would never meet. There was a culture that was distinct and non-American, and this was the significant difference between me and the Black kids at school. I was Nigerian and they were not.

My conception of identity was not a racial one, and it was difficult to see the overarching problem of race when I went to a predominantly Black school and I was being minoritized.

* * *

Michael was my friend. He lived in the dorms across from me. We were heading out to our classes one frosty morning, he said hello, and we became friends. Michael was White, and it meant nothing to me.

In my first year at Penn State, the Black football players were receiving death threats. Racial tensions arose on campus. Members of the Black Caucus were getting death threats for standing up for the players. It was inevitable that it would reach the students who were not in the spotlight, who were just trying to focus on their exams. Walking back from classes once, I heard a young Black woman shriek. She claimed the White driver of the car that just passed tried to run her over. I didn't see it with my eyes, and my racial understanding was still being developed, so I hadn't seen it with my discernment either. But soon I would.

Michael and I were walking to class as usual, chatting, and laughing. Suddenly, someone yelled out of his dorm window, "Nigger lover!" and then hid.

I almost didn't hear it. But Michael turned red, and defending me demanded the coward come down and tell us to our faces. Meanwhile, I was engaging in a serious conflict and asking a series of questions: Was he calling me the Nigger? But Nigger is what White people called Black people, and I'm Nigerian. If anything I am what the Nigerians called Akata or what the African Americans called African Booty Scratcher. But how can he know? And what does it matter? And what does this mean? In my father's land, I am Yoruba. Ijebu, to be specific. Here, I am just another Black girl.

Media and Race-Sensing

Framing her work on Phelan's multiple worlds model, Awokoya (2012) proposes a fourth world through which immigrants make sense of their social identities: media. According to Stuart Hall (2021), "media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the problem of a race is understood to be" (p. 170). Symbolic annihilation further explains that limited or no coverage of a racial group subversively erases the groups' existence and needs from social conscience. Traditionally, film and television in the United States are critical sites through which individuals, immigrants especially, understand race and their place in a society, valued or not. I call this process by which we come to make sense of race through a mediated lens, *race-sensing*. It is the subsequent subconscious contemplation of our social world as a result of active engagement with mediated text which present racially encoded

bodies. In line with Hall and in spirit with Frantz Fanon, essayist Carl Hancock Rux (2003) contends that the identity performance of marginalized groups is scripted by dominant groups and oppressive institutions stating, "the oppressed continue to live in the dream of identity, the dream that (in reality) the oppressed are, in fact, Negro, Colored, Black, Minority, Afro or African American…All accepted as real identities. The acceptance of these identities further compels a performance of these identities, whether compliant or rebellious" (p. 19). Put another way, Black people across the diaspora often choose to embody or reject prevailing imagery of blackness often associated with low-status culture. For Black immigrants and their children this is particularly important considering their motivations toward economic mobility, constant identity negotiations within their multiple worlds, and its impact on their relationship with their families, friends, and peers.

Regarding identity performance, Judith Butler (2011) argued that we learn different physical expressions to mark our identities as masculine or feminine. A bend of the knee, a toss of the hair, sitting, or standing posture, tentative or direct speech are all ways through which we act out gender. Similarly, race is enacted through the body, speech, and discourse. In her interview and analysis of tweets, Maragh (2018) observed how Black members of twitter monitored in-group members' interests (likes), speech, and vernacular use, resigning them to "acting white" if the contents of their posts or retweets did not align with Black cultural esthetics. As such, there are boundaries to what blackness is permitted to look like.

In her analysis of the popular viral star Antoine Dodson, Johnson (2013) examines Dodson's fashion choices and his language as a marker of race, class, and sexuality, highlighting the contexts in which he switches between African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard English. Similarly, McCune (2008) observes the ways in which down low (straight) men perform queerness in nightclubs highlighting the layers of two conflicting selves culminating into dissonant performances of racial and sexual identity. As a hybrid, there is also dissonance, a calculated repression of the self along with a selective performance of a contextual identity. As Johnson (2013) states, "inextricably linked to all ways of being, blackness does not belong to one group or individual. However, to mimic the various performances of blackness is to appropriate what it means to be black and enact a black identity" (p. 160). In her study of Black immigrants, Awokoya (2012) found that Nigerian parents' ideas about Black Americans were influenced by their reliance on television

news, and as such they became deliberate about distinguishing their children from *them*. Their children, on the other hand, carried the burden of defying stereotypes of both Black Americans and Africans present in the media. In addition, Awokoya's (2012) sample shared their need to authenticate their Black Americanness by, taking a cue from media, adjusting their accents and listening to hip-hop in order to avoid rejection from their Black American peers. Race-sensing leads to a reproduction of racial ideologies through racial performance (a willful act) and performativity (a subconscious enactment) (Giardina, 2003).

I was three years old, and developing relationships with media characters. One of my favorite shows to watch was Family Ties with my forever big brother, Michael J. Fox. I later discovered an even more relatable older brother in Malcolm Jamal Warner who played Theo Huxtable in the Cosby Show. Every Thursday at 8 p.m. I sat to watch a show about family, at least to me. As a graduate student, I would learn that for some critics the show, being one of the very few network programs featuring an All-Black cast, did not accurately reflect the socio-economic reality of Black Americans in the inner-city during the crack epidemic. Though we lived below the poverty line within Baltimore city limits, the dissonance between those realities and a prosperous future was not on my radar. The aspiration of a medical doctor husband and lawyer wife made perfect sense, especially to a child of Nigerian immigrants.

A decade later, I sat in front of the television at the same time slot to watch the premiere of Martin! starring Martin Lawrence. Martin! was familiar, but foreign. Familiar because he was iconic within Black popular culture. Foreign, because much of his comedic performance did not resonate with how I saw myself. He reminded me of In Living Color, a sketch comedy show I watched diligently for discussion around the lunch table at my all Black school. Fresh Prince. Sister Sister. All That. Jodeci vs. *Shai, Mary* vs. *Toni. All fodder for cafeteria banter Martin! would be added to the list. So I needed to study.*

I watched at home, and laughed with the live audience. The next day classmates would chat about last night's episode, reciting comical lines. It would occur to me that I understood, but didn't understand. I was an outsider, learning the necessary codes to interpret the humor, and finally being able to derive enjoyment on my own. For example, when Martin leads a solo after Tommy gives his eulogy for the plumber presumed dead, I laugh because of the violation of expectation and my familiarity with Martin! as the jester who sings with very limited vocal skill. With time, I learned the cultural code rooted in the spiritual expressions of the traditional Black church which I did

not attend until college and begin to appreciate this scene differently. With experience, I develop reference points which packs a special punch to the joy growing in my belly.

I was most perplexed by Martin's relationship with Pam. Growing up I'd heard about people "jivin'" on one another. I would learn about the dozens in school, but as a pre-teen they were just incessant unsolicited insults between friends. I didn't understand that kind of friendship. Until I saw one. I was 18 years old now in college watching the gospel choir director and the keyboardist hurl insults about each other's lips, eyes, singing voices, glasses, and grandmas. Every time the two of them got together people watched, laughed, and scored their insults against each other.

Martin and Pam. I understand now.

To some extent, I was bothered by the stereotypical representations in shows like Martin. However, in retrospect, I realize I adopted some of these characteristics when interacting with my Black American friends. I learned to mimic this style of communication when I was being humorous or delivering a joke, and developed an alternate ego. One that was loud, at times demonstrative in speech, danced in response to good news, and used colloquialisms like "Hol' up!" "You go girl!", "Stompin' with the big dawgs" and "bruh man" to describe strange men. In those performative moments, I stood outside of myself and became both spectacle and audience, feeling somewhat dissonant within myself while feeling connected to something bigger than me. Yet, my elocution and performance was always under scrutiny.

* * *

Since I was three, Nigerian films scared me. My father would tell me I could learn a lot about life from watching movies about women pressured to bear men sons and people in different kinds of spiritual bondage. I also did not have six hours to commit to watching several parts to one film. So I stopped.

That was the 80s.

Modern Nigerian films were much more metropolitan, their characters, a bit more Westernized, like me. But still very Naija, unlike me. I couldn't relate, but wanted to. I wanted to playfully insult my Nigerian friends with terms like "raz boy", or invite them to gossip by exclaiming "gist me now!" I wish I could speak pidgin with the right amount of Lagos that when I expressed, "no wahala", they wouldn't take a second look to inquire about my authenticity.

As a mother, to my American Nigerian daughter, I find myself performing the stereotypical Nigerian mother I watched in Nollywood films as a child. One who yells, is easily frustrated, holds the top of her head in worry, and slaps the back of her left hand into her right palms to display exasperation. I am so much a caricature that even my daughter finds me entertaining, not threatening as a child growing up in Nigeria might find such a mother. Still something is off. This is not me, completely.

My inbetweeness was still nowhere to be found onscreen.

I Am an African Booty Scratcher (Nigerian Is the New Cool)

Sierra Leonean-American Nikyatu Jusu visually depicts the internal conflicts between American-born children and their African parents in her short film *African Booty Scratcher* (2007). Set in New York, a hub for the Black diaspora, the film follows the journey of a young second-generation American teenager, Isatu, as she navigates her multiple worlds at an all-Black school, her Sierra Leonean home, and her peer group. Jusu describes the film as "a coming of age story [where] West African tradition conflicts with American idealism" which leaves the main character grappling with her identity commitments. The film juxtaposes the very clear ethnic orientations of her Sierra Leonean mother and her Americanized daughter. We meet her mother talking on a long-distance phone call to Isatu's father in their native tongue, wearing native clothing, and cooking *joloff* rice. Isatu, on the other hand, speaks with an identifiable New York accent and upon returning from school expressed a preference for spaghetti instead. Isatu rejects the native clothes her mother sewed for prom and her mother quips, "You know people here in America name themselves, Kenya, Egypt or something…You don't even want to know how to cook joloff rice." Here, her mother calls out her second-generation daughter's desire to distance herself from her culture and ultimately from her mother while Black Americans are seeking to connect with the motherland.

In her most recent stand up special, Momma I Made it (2020), Yvonne Orji makes reference to this pejorative term while celebrating that being "Nigerian is the new cool." In making this statement, Orji delivers a rhetorical contrast between a word meant to dehumanize Africans and the economic and cultural success of Black immigrants in the United States. In 2016, Damilare Sonoki, a 1.5 generation American and former writer