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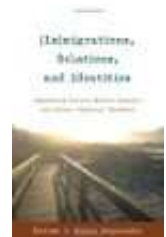
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(Im)migrations, Relations, and Identities: Negotiating Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and African

reviewed by Kathleen Corley – October 15, 2014

Title: (Im)migrations, Relations, and Identities: Negotiating Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and African
Author(s): Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka
Publisher: Peter Lang Publishing, New York
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What does it mean to be African, African American, African (American), or of African *ascent*? Such queries defy pat answers; fortunately, none are offered in *(Im)migrations, Relations, and Identities: Negotiating Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and African (American) Identities*. Instead, Chinwe L. Ezueh Okpalaoka teases out her meanings for these monikers much as she might a braid, unravelling the interlaced parts, combing out tangled strands, and then weaving it all back together again. For Okpalaoka, “braids are used metaphorically to signify strength ... [and] remind us of unity, community, and togetherness” (p.53).

The descriptors—African, African American, African (American), and of African ascent—represent more than variations in phrasing or subtle shades of nuance in this work. In the opening chapter, Okpalaoka details how these terms evoke divergent histories laden with the influences of distinct times and places, yet connect to a shared continent of heritage. To highlight this shared connection, the authors make a typographical assertion by placing the word *American* within parenthesis: African (American). African becomes the primary identifier; American is parenthetical. In this way, readers are reminded of the linked histories of people whose ancestors were kidnapped and sold into slavery along with those who remained on the continent and lived through the subjugation of colonialism and the complications of post-colonialism. Okpalaoka also lays claim to the right to name things on her own terms, and counters the dominant discourse that has historically served to denigrate. She employs terms that turn literal meaning upside down. These include: African *ascendant*, rather than *descendant* “to describe people of African heritage and their forward-moving nature” (p. 2), a coinage attributed to Kohain Hahlevi and Dillard’s (2000) usage of *endarkened* in place of enlightened (p. 10). Naming and framing are crucially important in this work. Okpalaoka and Dillard take an endarkened feminist epistemology, which shares in Audre Lorde’s view that “Black feminism is not White feminism in blackface” (Lorde, 2009), and calls for an acceptance of difference.

Identity and affiliation are particularly relevant in the context of public schooling in the U.S., where children and youth with assorted ties to various continents sit side by side in classrooms and encounter assumptions regarding race, culture and difference (Paris, 2011). Who can claim to be African? Who is American, North American, or U.S. American for that matter? This volume focuses specifically on Africa and draws on data from a study the author conducted with immigrant girls from West Africa and African (American) girls. Okpalaoka explores the notion of pan-African identity, and how such an identity framework might ameliorate the tensions between recently arrived African immigrant girls and their African (American) classmates. Teachers, administrators, and parents of school-age children will find this book instructive. Likewise, readers interested in the intersection of heritage, race, culture, tradition, and gender roles will benefit from Okpalaoka’s reflective account.

Unlike African (Americans), immigrants to the U.S. from Africa typically have not had occasion to perceive themselves as members of a minority. Once in the U.S., however, these immigrants will be positioned in society as a minority group and marginalized. Okpalaoka tells us that African immigrants are placed on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, in large part due to the mass media’s representation of Africa as a continent of poverty and famine.

Elsewhere in the world, African (Americans) are depicted in assorted stereotypes rooted in the legacy of servitude as slaves or servants, or as uneducated and lazy. Okpalaoka describes the prefabricated positioning of Black American identity she was exposed to as a child in Nigeria: in fiction, African (American) characters were “live-in servants who spoke in a thick dialect” (p. 75); in non-fiction, the transatlantic slave trade was the only topic covered about African (Americans); and in both contexts, African (Americans) were always situated within the context of servitude.

The final chapter asks what's in a name, and, by this point in the book, readers know the answer is quite a bit! Okpalaoka describes routinely needing to spell her name and responding to people's mispronunciations of her name. This plight—common to many people in the U.S. with non-Anglo-Saxon names—may be a minor annoyance for adults, but can be painfully significant for adolescents. Okpalaoka interviewed one student who describes anticipating feelings of embarrassment two years in advance of a graduation ceremony: “Because [my last name] is so long ... when I get my diploma, they'll be like, 'Madeline... [long pause].’ Yeah I don't wanna walk across the stage and everybody's laughing at me” (p. 115).

In this evocative volume, Okpalaoka thoughtfully explores questions and challenges of African identity formation. I read this book while in Morocco, on the northern tip of Africa across a sea from Europe, and my experience gave rise to a number of unanswered questions. Does Okpalaoka really mean *Black* African exclusively when she refers to people from the continent of Africa? Who has a right to claim an African identity? Skin color and geography are often conflated in the interpretation of what it means to be African, yet the perception of Black or White may have little to do with skin color in other contexts. Okpalaoka recounts an instance in which her father in Nigeria was asked by a local security guard if he was White; Okpalaoka conjectures that the guard associated college education with the affordances of Whiteness. Though the examples touch on the imprecision with which humans parcel difference into categories, the book would be strengthened by an acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of assigning and assuming labels, and an examination of race as a sociocultural construction, rather than a biological reality.

This book's greatest appeal lies in its straightforward personal narrative quality. Okpalaoka describes how she straddles two continents and keeps a toehold in both; she uses the metaphor of a bridge to illustrate her role as the conduit between her parent's generation and that of her children. *(Im)migrations, relations, and identities* is an ambitious book that touches on history, Africa, identity, feminism, naming, voice, cultural memory, race, ethnicity, tradition, gender-roles, and cultural maintenance. Okpalaoka reflects upon her roles and responsibilities as researcher, parent, community member, and concludes that her work belongs to her community, not to her alone.

Readers involved in K-12 education—particularly those in schools located in cities and towns that have experienced high levels of immigration in recent years—may finish the book still hungry and craving suggestions for helping African immigrant and African (American) girls bridge their differences in schools. But an effective book is not necessarily one that addresses all readers' potential questions. Okpalaoka piques her readers' interest and prompts further investigation; it is a significant contribution. A call for further inquiry does not detract from the value of this work, but attests to its generative quality. Good books, like good conversations, prompt more questions than they answer and keep the dialogue moving forward.

References

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(Im)migrations, Relations, and Identities. of African Peoples: Toward an Endarkened Transnational Feminist. The focus of this article will be on the sense of what an African (American) identity could mean when viewed through the processes of migrations and fluid identities of contemporary African immigrant children as they interact with their African (Americans) peers in our schools. The purpose of this article is to use data from a study of West African immigrant girls and their process of ethnic identity construction to support our position for new discourses and methodologies that challenge the dominant discourses surrounding the Black educational experience in our schools. This purpose can be The modern African diaspora, at its core, consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon "racial" oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral. Africa, in all of its cultural richness and diversity, remained very much alive in the receiving societies as the various ethnic groups created new cultures and recreated their old ways as circumstances allowed. Editorial Reviews. Review. African Diaspora Identities: Negotiating Culture in Transnational Migration is a fascinating and groundbreaking discussion of contemporary African migration as one of the major challenges faced by postcolonial African states. Explaining complex identities and a variety of migration goals, grouped as "collective altruism," African Diaspora Identities demonstrates how Africans in a "transnationalized diaspora" develop their nations and change the image of Africa. The African diaspora is the worldwide collection of communities descended from native Africans or people from Africa, predominantly in the Americas. The term is most commonly refers to the descendants of the West and Central Africans who were enslaved and shipped to the Americas via the Atlantic slave trade between the 16th and 19th centuries, with their largest populations in Brazil, the United States and Haiti. Some scholars identify "four circulatory phases" of this migration out of Africa. The Start by marking Migrations, Relations, and Identities: Negotiating Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and African (American) Identities as Want to Read: Want to Read saving | Want to Read. The movement and dispersion of African ascendant peoples around the globe has been historically rooted in struggle and oppression. Whether through slavery, colonialism, or the economic fallout of both, we are always in a state of renegotiating and recreating identities wherever we have found ourselves in the Diaspora. In our displacement, contestations have arisen about wh The movement and dispersion of African ascendant peoples around the globe has been historically rooted in struggle and oppression.