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There is limited research that examines the experiences of Caribbean students despite the increased presence of international students attending institutions of higher education in the United States. This qualitative dissertation used individual interviews and a focus group to explore the academic, cultural, social, and racial experiences of Caribbean students pursuing their undergraduate studies in the United States. Eighteen students from English, French, Spanish, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean islands, all of who were currently attending or recently graduated from four distinct institutions of higher education in the United States, including three predominantly white institutions and one Hispanic-serving institution, were represented in this study. By using a postcolonial theoretical lens to analyze the collected data, this study illuminates Caribbean students' resilient nature and challenges educators to consider the nuanced factors that play a critical role in the students' experiences. The stories told throughout this study suggested that, while Caribbean students come from the same region, there are both commonalities and differences within their experiences; the context surrounding their racial experiences are multilayered; their academic, cultural, and social experiences are closely linked to salient aspects of their Caribbean identity; and their experiences do not always align with the typical results of other research about international students at U.S. higher education institutions. The findings suggest a need for deeper understanding among educators and institutions as it relates to the uniqueness of students who come from the Caribbean region.

A STUDY OF CARIBBEAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT U.S.  
INSTITUTIONS

by

Hazael Andrew

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Approved by

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## DEDICATION

To my family and friends, for all your love, kindness and prayers.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As I was concluding this dissertation several months after the one-on-one interviews and focus group, tropical storm Dorian started making its way towards the Caribbean. I was concerned because my family, on the island of Dominica, was in the initial projected path of the storm, and I could not help but recall the stories of a few of the Caribbean student participants about the psychological impacts these storms had on their experiences. On September 1, 2019, Dorian became a category 5 hurricane before making landfall in the Bahamas. When I heard the news of its impact, I contacted the participants from the Bahamas via WhatsApp, asking if they had heard from their families. I received a response from one participant, Damian, with pictures and videos of his family's flooded house and his neighborhood with sounds of people crying out for help. He then shared, "Hey, thank you so much for reaching out to me...well this time we weren't spared like last time. Keep my family and everyone in the Bahamas in your prayers." Having personally experienced days of silence from my family after the passage of category 5 hurricane Maria over Dominica on September 18, 2017, I was heartbroken by the news from Damian. Even more disheartening is learning that, in the midst of this tragedy, President Donald Trump cautioned against allowing impacted Bahamians into the United States (U.S.) without proper documentation, claiming they could be "very bad people and some very bad gang members and some very bad drug

dealers” (The Washington Post, September 9, 2019). There are many contributing factors to high crime rates in certain areas of the U.S., and the actual danger presented by people fleeing a country demolished by a hurricane is minimal. Though I was extremely angered by his comments, I remain hopeful knowing this dissertation work would counter such negative narratives by showing how those from the Caribbean demonstrate resilience, including in the wake of challenges due to catastrophic events such as this one. Dorian caused catastrophic devastation in the Bahamas. Even with the President deterring people from entering the U.S., it is likely that there will be a significant influx of Bahamian people, including those who attend college, making it more likely that faculty and staff at U.S. mainland universities will be working with Caribbean students.

There were 1,184,735 international students attending colleges and universities in the U.S. in the 2016-2017 academic year (Sevis, 2017). As a former international student from the Caribbean, I know from first-hand experience that students who come from other countries benefit from studying in the U.S.; however, they can encounter challenges as a result of their transition to a new country and educational institution. Even with the overt challenges that these students face today, the discourse related to them tends to focus on the ways they positively affect domestic students, institutions of higher education, and the U.S. economy. I believe such discourse shifts the focus away from the students’ experiences, the context of their identity as it relates to race, and it shares a narrative that fails to explore the ways in which Caribbean students personally thrive or the extent of their resiliency at institutions of higher education. This dissertation study

addressed the gap in this narrative by focusing solely on the experiences of Caribbean students, both immigrant and nonimmigrant.

Although research exists on international students in higher education (Cho & Yu, 2015; Glass, 2012; Hegarty, 2014; Mitchell, Greenwood, & Guglielmi, 2007; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Yan & Sendall, 2016; Ye & Inose, 2003), there is limited research that focuses on Caribbean students. A review of educational databases reveals there are only few studies (Edward-Joseph & Baker, 2012; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Morrison & Bryan, 2014) in the U.S. that investigate the social experiences of Caribbean students, the ways in which they make meaning of their time in the U.S. academic classroom, and the nuances of their cultural and racial experiences once they arrive in a new country. Given that colleges and universities have seen a steady increase in international students over the past 14 years (Institute of International Education, 2016), all levels of staff must pay attention to international students' holistic collegiate experiences. Hence, one of the primary goals of this study was to amplify the voices of Caribbean students in a way that allows faculty, staff, and administrators working closely with them to be more aware of their experiences. This work is centered on three research questions.

### **Research Questions**

Question 1: In what ways does race affect the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 2: What are the differences and commonalities in the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 3: In what ways do Caribbean students navigate their academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the U.S. that might enable an improved understanding of their experiences?

### **The Caribbean Region**

The Caribbean (also known as the West Indies) is a region southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and the North American mainland, and north of South and Central America (New World Encyclopedia, 2018). It has a population of nearly 38 million (2010 estimate) and is made up of over 7,000 islands that cover 1,063,000 square miles (Briney, 2019). The Caribbean is known for its tropical climate and is a vacation destination for many citizens from developed Western countries. My own relationship to the Caribbean is personal because I was born and raised there. I know from my high school educational experience there that it has a rich history, which includes overcoming oppressive systems. The small physical size of the islands that make up the Caribbean region understates its distinct role in history. It can be hard to imagine that during the conquest of the Americas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Caribbean was instrumental in the numerous campaigns between the European nations that desired to establish bases that would provide access to wealth in distant lands to the west (Sahay, Robinson, & Cashin, 2006, p. 1). The Caribbean also played a significant role in the slave trade, particularly when Jamaica and Haiti became two of the largest slave societies of the region by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Sahay et al., 2006, p. 1). Today, a visit to the Caribbean reveals a diverse amalgam throughout the islands' literature, music, art, food, and other cultural norms- but also, in a self-contradictory way, between the shared histories of that diversity.

Given the Caribbean's proximity to the U.S., the significance of education to the citizens there, and the perceived value of an education from a U.S. institution of higher education, many Caribbean students grow up with a desire to pursue their higher education studies in the United States. As a young boy growing up there, my parents instilled in me that one of my goals should be to immigrate to the U.S. in hopes of pursuing higher education and a more prosperous life. In hindsight, this is fascinating because neither of my parents, who are from the Caribbean, attended high school. Regardless of this fact, there was an underlying belief that those who left for the U.S. would have a much better chance of financially supporting their family back in the Caribbean. I believe this to be true. I know countless friends and family members who left the Caribbean for the U.S. and came back to publicly attest to their truth that the U.S. provided educational and employment opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable in the Caribbean. Consequently, immigrating to the U.S is a dream for many individuals who live in the Caribbean region.

Figure 1.1 Map of the Caribbean



### Introduction to Type of Study

This study was an interview-based critical qualitative study to learn about the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States. Qualitative interviewers ask participants open-ended questions to gain information about their unique perspectives on a particular experience and then listen intently for special language and other clues that reveal meaning structures that participants use to understand their world (Hatch, 2002). The critical angle of this study is important because, as Weis and Fine (2004) state, “We are witnessing an attack on critical understanding of the relationship between education and power and on the critical research that underpins it” (p. ix). The results of this study raise awareness around the ways in which Caribbean students thrive in U.S. higher education institutions because it

provides a guided path for the creation of strategies that could be used by faculty, staff, and administrators to support them as they transition to life in a new country and educational institution.

This study involved 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and one focus group, each lasting between 1 hour and 1 hour and 30 minutes in length with participants who identify as being from the Caribbean region. Considering that Caribbean students' experiences are different based on the island they were born and raised; I conducted interviews with Caribbean students from different islands. I had participants not only from English-speaking islands, but from Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and Spanish-speaking islands. I was fortunate to have participants from the Lesser Antilles and the Greater Antilles regions of the Caribbean who attend or recently graduated from an institution of higher education in the United States as an undergraduate student. Specifically, nine distinct Caribbean Islands (Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Tobago, Dominican Republic, Haiti, St. Maarten, Antigua, Bahamas, and Cuba) and four different institutions of higher education in the United States were represented in this study. The methods used to recruit and select these Caribbean student participants will be outlined in the methods chapter of this dissertation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this interview-based critical qualitative study was to explore the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States. This study also aimed to reveal the role that race plays in the experiences of Caribbean students. Omi and Winant (2015) underscore the need to

study race when they claim, “The weapon and wound of racial disadvantage and dispossession continues to be ignored today. Structural forms of racial inequality persist and, in many cases, have deepened” (p. 1). In this study, I provide a first-hand account of how race impacts the experiences of Caribbean students. Because the participants were both immigrants and nonimmigrants Caribbean students, the differences and commonalities in their experiences were particularly important in providing a basis for what is salient to some Caribbean students.

### **Significance of Study**

I aimed to make this study accessible, relevant, and useful for a wide range of people working in campus offices that influence student’s experiences, including international student offices, diversity and inclusion offices, student affairs departments, college academic units, and college transition programs. By taking a critical look at the experiences of Caribbean students, institutions that enroll these students will be more aware of how to support them. A search of Caribbean students in the U.S. reveals there are many institutions that enroll them in large numbers, while others have expressed interest in creating exchange programs with schools from the Caribbean. This is particularly true for some institutions in the state of Florida, New York, and Texas. Still, the experiences of Caribbean students are not a highly researched topic in education. Therefore, the results of this study can be a resource for institutions in these states and all who are interested in the experiences of Caribbean students, including high school and college preparatory schools in the Caribbean that desire to prepare their students for higher education studies in the United States. By listening and reflecting upon Caribbean

students' experiences, institutional leaders, faculty, and staff can draw from the shared experiences of the individual participants of this study as they create and refine programs and initiatives designed for that population. Through numerous informal presentations and conversations about this study thus far, I have witnessed the ways in which the results of this study allows administrators, faculty, and staff at institutions of higher education to be more aware of Caribbean students' experiences, while critically adding to the discourse and literature on their experiences in a way that focuses on their resilient nature.

### **Introduction to Theoretical Framework**

A dissertation study with a critical social justice approach demands that I interrogate issues of power and privilege that connect to both my research participants and the region of the world where they were born and raised. Mansfield (2016) states, "using critical theory as a lens to view data assists researchers in determining where a discourse/policy/practice is just or unjust, fair or unfair" (p. 296). The critical theory that undergirds this study is postcolonial theory because it closely aligns with the purpose of this study, and it illuminates historical struggles that could help inform the perspectives of the participants. In fact, I discuss remnants of colonial struggles in the Caribbean, in both the data and final chapters, which were revealed in participants' stories. Although I have chosen to provide a more detailed explanation of postcolonial theory and the work of postcolonial theorist Edward Said in the methodology chapter of this dissertation, I will share an initial definition and its connections to this study.

The term “postcolonial” has been employed in a range of different readings and interpretations. However, from a postmodern perspective, it is not necessary to have a universally accepted definition for the term. Gresson III (2008) shares the following definition that links to this dissertation study when he states:

Postcolonialism (also called postcolonial theory) is a term used to identify several lines of scholarship and research undertaken by those interested in the development of national and group identities and intergroup relations within geographical areas once dominated by colonial powers. Scholars writing in this tradition are concerned with the legacy of colonialism- what is life like for those who have been both brutalized and constructed or shaped by those whose primary goal was the exploitation of resources. (p. 130)

Postcolonial theory can serve as a tool that enables the cultural study of a reformulated identity by revealing the ways in which American culture impinges upon those who self-identify as being from “border regions” like the Caribbean (Madsen, 2003). This context is important when studying the experiences of Caribbean students in the United States because “by the onset of the seventeenth century, the Caribbean Basin had been the scene of Spanish colonizing activities for over one hundred years” (Roper, 2018, p. 1). Because every Caribbean island has a unique history, there are multiple and competing dynamics that can serve as sources of oppression and liberation for Caribbean students in the United States, particularly within the context of their academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences. Chancy (2003) encourages researchers who are interested in studying the Caribbean region to, “re-think and interrogate their perceptions of Caribbean identity in ways that engage historical and cultural specificity with an eye to understanding and then dismantling the racial and class-bound hierarchies that manifest themselves in disunity in

and among the islands” (p. 169). Given this context, postcolonial theory provided a worthy lens to analyze and amplify the voices of Caribbean students pursuing studies at institutions of higher education in the United States.

### **Positionality and Researcher’s Identity**

My positionality has influenced my desire and excitement to engage in this type of work. Bettez (2015) defines positionality as, “involving the combination of social status groups to which one belongs (such as race, class, gender, and sexuality) and one’s personal experience (understanding that experience is always individually interpreted, and it is the interpretation that gives an experience meaning)” (p. 935). I believe there are four main positionalities that influenced my approach to this work. I am (a) Afro-Caribbean, (b) a dual-citizen (Commonwealth of Dominica and the United States), (c) a social justice advocate, and (d) a staff member at a global education unit of a PWI who work with stakeholders to infuse global knowledge and perspectives in North Carolina community colleges and K-12 schools. These positionalities influenced my relationship with the research participants. Furthermore, it guided the ways that I approached this work, including the interactions and follow-up I had with the participants. In the sections that follow, I will discuss aspects of these positionalities so readers can fully understand my connection to this work.

### **Caribbean Upbringing and Dual Citizen**

I was born and raised in the Commonwealth of Dominica, a small island in the southern Caribbean that is located between two French islands, Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south. Although I am a proud naturalized U.S. citizen today, I

consider my country of birth to be most salient to my identity, and I spend a significant amount of time staying connected to my immediate family and friends back in Dominica. As I reflect on this study, I am proud of the courage I displayed migrating to the United States as a 16-year-old high school student from the Caribbean island of Dominica. My life and that of my immediate family back in Dominica are better today because of it. I grew up in a poor home with very little resources. My father, who passed away from prostate cancer 10 years ago, was a successful farmer, but he was unable to read and write. My mother has a middle school education and has not worked outside of the home for as long as I have known her. I grew up with one brother and a half-sister. From the time I was 12 years old, it was customary for my brother and I to walk a few miles after school to work on my father's farm or spend our weekends and summer holidays working at local hotels to assist with our family's daily living needs. While I enjoyed all these jobs, I knew I had the potential to do other things. Starting at the age of 13, being a ground maintenance worker during the day and then working as a cook assistant at night for three consecutive summers at the Coconut Beach Hotel in Dominica was the primary experience that triggered thought of a life that was more financially secure.

Then, I finally caught a break when a high school recruiter from Miami, Florida, attended my high school basketball game. He offered me a scholarship to play basketball for his K-12 boarding school. I accepted the scholarship after my parents deemed that it was the best educational move for me. In hindsight, it was quite a transition to the United States! After months of planning and anxiety, the day had finally come for me to move to the United States. My mother, brother, and half-sister drove me to the Melville Hall

Airport (now renamed the Douglas Charles Airport) in Marigot, Dominica, so that I could take my flight to Barbados. Barbados, a small island south of Dominica, is where the closest U.S embassy to Dominica is located. The plan was for me to travel to the United States from Barbados, pending the approval of my F-1 visa. As I embarked on this trip, I was extremely nervous for many reasons. First, as a kid, I was fearful of heights and avoided getting on anything that went up too high in the air. Second, I was worried about the U.S embassy not approving my F-1 visa. I had friends and family members from Dominica who had traveled to Barbados for a visa only to get denied. I, too, was initially denied but was able to get the F-1 visa approved on the same day after having additional documentation faxed to the U.S. embassy from my school. Third, having to move to a new country where I had no family or friends sank in as I boarded my flight to Barbados. I had a strong network of friends and family in Dominica, and I was leaving everything behind.

By the time I arrived in the U.S. as an international student from the Caribbean, the process for me to get there stultified me. Moreover, my journey and path once I arrived in the U.S. got more complex. I spoke English but had a strong Caribbean accent that drew a lot of attention. It was common to have to repeat myself in schools because my teacher and fellow classmates did not understand what I was saying, or simply because they were intrigued by my accent. Furthermore, I quickly learned that I was subject to the same stereotypes assigned to African Americans despite being Afro-Caribbean. Police officers pulled me over for no apparent reasons, and I was followed around in departmental stores as a college student. My international status contributed to

my transitional struggles as well. For example, immigration officers harassed me at the port of entry whenever I was returning to the U.S. from visiting my family in the Commonwealth of Dominica.

Regardless of these challenges, I successfully graduated from a small boarding school in Laurinburg, North Carolina. Then, I attended St. Andrew's Presbyterian College for one year on an athletic scholarship before transferring to Fayetteville State University (FSU), an HBCU. I was offered a basketball scholarship at FSU, and it covered my tuition, fees, room, and board. My schedule was demanding as a student-athlete, but I felt supported by the caring nature of the faculty and staff. I remember conversations with one of my former professors who shared that HBCUs have played an important role in the development of Black scholars in the United States. She frequently mentioned names such as Martin L. King, Jr, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. Du Bois, referring to them as products of the HBCU environment (P. Jackson, personal communication, September 2004). I stayed motivated and worked hard, academically and athletically. My efforts paid off when I graduated from FSU in May 2007 with two degrees and a 3.78 grade point average (GPA).

After FSU, I ventured south to Mississippi State University (MSU), a predominantly White institution (PWI) in Starkville, Mississippi, for graduate school. My experience at MSU was different than anything that I had encountered. I struggled to fit into the predominantly White environment at MSU. Unlike FSU, where there were many faculty, staff, and students of color, MSU was predominantly white, and it took me a while to get adjusted. I gravitated towards the few persons of color on the campus,

desperately seeking a support system as I navigated my way through the institution as a Black international student. I became close friends with an exchange student from Paris, France, who today is one of my closest friends. Somehow, I survived MSU and graduated with a Master of Business Administration and a 3.63 GPA. My educational at MSU opened the door for professional opportunities for me.

### **Student Affairs Professional and Social Justice Advocate**

Since graduating from MSU, I have worked professionally for 12 years at four different institutions and have spent the past four years working on a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Educational Studies with a concentration in Cultural Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Throughout these years, I guided students as they navigate the University environment, connecting them to resources that could contribute to their success. In fact, one of my primary job functions, when I was the Assistant Director of First Year Experience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was to impact the experiences of over 4,400 first-year students positively. While it was overwhelming most times, I stayed invigorated by the learning that took place among first-year students, many of whom was their first experience living away from their family and high school friends. Given the aforementioned personal experiences of being an international student from the Caribbean, I was always intentional in creating initiatives to help international students successfully transition to their University and life in a new country.

Some of the international initiatives I was involved in during my time in student affairs include developing living and learning communities for international students,

taking students with limited travel experiences and high financial need on cultural immersion trips, and connecting faculty and staff to international students in institution-wide matching programs. In most cases, I have done so not because it was a requirement of my job, but because I am passionate about the experiences of students who come from different countries. I find these endeavors to be rewarding and meaningful. I can reflect on my personal experiences as an international student from the Caribbean and be grateful for the opportunity to pay it forward by contributing to efforts that could make the transition to college easier for other international students who study in the United States.

It has been just over a year since I accepted an Associate Director position in the World View department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In this role, I assist North Carolina community colleges and K-12 educators in globalizing their academic and co-curricular offerings, manage a state-wide Global Distinction Program where students at North Carolina community colleges have the opportunity to graduate with global distinction, take North Carolina community college and K-12 educators who have never been out of the U.S. on study visits to different countries around the world, and help the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill actualize its global strategy. What I enjoy most about this work is the opportunity it provides to educate both students and educators about the importance of thinking globally, which could allow them to be more mindful of the experiences of students who are coming to study in the United States from various regions of the world.

Finally, I consider myself to be a social justice advocate and have attempted to take a critical approach to social justice in my work. I agree with researchers who believe a critical approach to social justice recognizes that society is stratified in substantial and far-reaching ways along social group lines (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. xx). Additionally, I believe there is a need to create programs and initiatives that positively affect students from marginalized identities, particularly at PWIs. I acted on this as the Assistant Director of First Year Experience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I worked to create gatherings in the residence halls for male students of color who were seeking a community of others who look like them. In just three years, the program grew from 14 students to 34 students. Today, this informal program is becoming a model for other PWIs in the U.S. that have started to offer similar programs in an effort to build community among men of color.

Within my sphere of influence, I work to identify and disrupt hegemonic structures. I do so by analyzing the environments that I am a part of and working within its systems to intervene in responsible ways to change it. As it relates to my recent work with international students in Student Affairs, I collaborated with staff from other units on my campus to pioneer a Global Resident Advisor (GRA) program that helps transition international students to the residential spaces. GRAs pay close attention to the experiences of international students in residential spaces, learning about their upbringing and experiences, and developing programs based on what international students would like to experience. Although the GRA position is in a hiatus stage, many international students have benefited from the program and reported feeling more supported because of

it. I see this study as an opportunity to provide useful content, knowledge, and resources that could help administrators at PWIs in the creation of these types of programs.

### **Critical Reflexivity in a Qualitative Study on Caribbean Students' Experiences**

Pillow (2010) states, "One of the most noticeable trends to come out of the use of reflexivity is increased attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process- a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel, affect data collection and analysis" (p. 274). I took from this the importance of self-awareness during this research process and the need to acknowledge one's perspectives, what one is drawn to, indifferent to, and repelled from and for what reasons, seeking out other perspectives on analysis when emotions run strong in reaction to participants' stories. This pertains to my research in the sense that my Caribbean upbringing and background allowed me to build rapport with research participants easily. Still, I needed to be mindful of the differences in upbringing that is possible within the Caribbean region. Consequently, I approached this work with an open heart and mind as I sought to learn about the experiences of the Caribbean student participants.

As a qualitative researcher, I was self-reflexive in the research process. Pillow (2010) discusses self-reflexivity as "critical consciousness through a personal accounting of how the researcher's self-location (e.g., across gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality), position and interest influence all stages of the research process" (p. 273). I felt a close connection to the Caribbean students that I researched in this study. As such, in the process of being self-reflexive, I always paid close attention to how my background and personal experiences influenced the research process. As Caribbean

students shared their stories during one on one interviews, I often acknowledged the personal connection I had with my participants. I listened attentively to them, asking the necessary follow-up questions that would allow them to share their unique stories and experiences.

In an effort to stay engaged in my research and maintain rigor throughout the research process, I kept a researcher's log. In this log, I tracked articles and readings that were influencing my thinking on Caribbean students, frequent search terms that I was using, and the various notes on conversations that I was having on my research topic. For example, during a trip to the Caribbean, I conversed with individuals about my research whenever the opportunity presented itself. As I wrote reflections in my log, I found that it challenged me to think of various angles of the research process. Furthermore, I decided to delve deeper into my own culture by reading and learning more about the formation of the Caribbean and the historical struggles of that region. The questions section of this log was the most useful to me because of the space it created to continually critique and write my thoughts on the ways the research process is influencing me. For example, I included statements such as: What type of questions (and follow-up questions) should I be asking of Caribbean students to answer the research questions adequately? How do I build confidence among research participants so they know that their stories could make a difference in the lives of other Caribbean students? How should I go about analyzing the data collected to capture the experiences of Caribbean students accurately? This was a beneficial aspect of the research process.

## **Where are We Today?**

Institutions of higher education recognize that an international experience is an important component of a 21<sup>st</sup> century education. More schools, both at the high school and college levels, are encouraging study abroad, offering global experiences locally, and creating curricula that embody a global perspective. Moreover, institutions of higher education have started to promote the notion that the world is the new classroom by embedding non-credit education into co-curricular programs such as alternative service spring break trips to other countries. Indeed, bringing the world into the classroom through a critical lens is an innovative teaching strategy that deviates from traditional classroom practices. I say all this because having students from other countries are often an important component of an institution's globalization efforts because of their unique perspective. However, we must not lose sight of their experiences. This study provided new perspectives around these discussions in the sense that it shifted the attention on Caribbean students' experiences in a way that is not often done. I believe this is important because the immigration rhetoric in the U.S. is overtly racist, and there is a need to have targeted efforts that help students who come from other countries feel welcome and appreciated in their environments.

The systematic racism and xenophobic sentiments in our society are much worse than many people think and desperately needs to be addressed. In 2017, President Donald Trump issued a travel ban to the U.S. from certain countries. Specifically, the ban included travelers from eight countries, six of which were Muslim-majority countries. These countries included Chad, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as North

Korea, and Venezuela. Furthermore, there are on-going political debates around the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), an immigration policy established by Executive Order by the Obama administration that allowed certain undocumented immigrants who entered the country as children to work temporarily and attend institutions of higher education. In fact, the United States federal government shutdown of 2018 (January 20, 2018, to January 22, 2018) was primarily due to disputes over DACA. Recently, there have been reports of hundreds of immigrant children being separated from their parents at the U.S. border. Social justice advocate lawyers are now filing lawsuits to force the Trump administration to pay for the mental health treatment of children suffering from the emotional effects of that separation (Richer, 2018). In the midst of this, the president of the United States has made funding a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border one of his top priorities since 2017, regardless of the negative impact it may have on others coming from other countries.

The negative impacts of these events are clear. Fischer (2017b) claims that it is likely to cause continued headaches for colleges, which have spent significant time convincing students and families from other countries that the United States remains a welcoming place (para. 3). Indeed, this is a challenge, particularly when President Donald Trump can publicly question why America would want immigrants from Haiti and Africa, which he referred to as “shithole” countries, and instead recommend getting immigrants from countries like Norway, which is predominantly White. Unfortunately, with the current administration slated to be in office until at least 2021, I expect colleges and universities to grapple with this upheaval as they work to create welcoming

environments for students of color who come from other countries. This means that the landscape of work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space at institutions of higher education in the U.S. requires faculty, staff, and administrators who are well informed, able to balance competing priorities, and appropriately respond to current events. The results of this study provide useful data that could assist in achieving this goal.

### **Terminology and Language**

To ensure readers understand terms used throughout this dissertation, I want to share definitions of the following terms:

- *Acculturation*: A term associated with the process of adapting to the rules, behaviors, and customs of a country and individuals who reside in it (Berry, 1980).
- *Afro-Caribbean*: Individuals with African descent who are coming from the Caribbean region (Collins English dictionary, 2018).
- *Caribbean (West Indies)*: A series of islands southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and the North American mainland, and north of South America (New World Encyclopedia, 2018).
- *Hispanic*: “Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person’s parents or ancestors before arriving in the United States” (U.S. Census, 2019).
- *International Students*: A student who is enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident) or refugee (USCIS, 2017)
- *Minoritized Countries*: Countries that have experienced mistreatment, and face prejudices that are enforced upon them because of situations outside of their control.
- *Race*: A social construction which changes over the course of time due to historical and social pressures (Omi & Winant, 2015).

- *Predominantly White Institution (PWI)*: Institutions of higher education in the U.S. that historically and currently are comprised of a majority of White students, faculty, staff and administrators (Grieger & Toliver, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

This study on the academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences of Caribbean students to institutions of higher education in the U.S. will raise awareness among key stakeholders who interact with them. More importantly, it reveals both the resilient and vulnerable nature of Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States. Since the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, institutions of higher education have struggled with ways to show the world that their College or University provides a welcoming community for those who hail from other countries. Hence, there could not have been a better time to embark on a study that examined the experience of Caribbean students. This chapter introduced the need for a study on the experiences of Caribbean students, the significance of such a study, the proposed theoretical framework used in analyzing the data, and how I was self-reflexive. I discussed the four main positionalities that influence my work and how this study could positively affect the experiences of Caribbean students. Unlike many studies on students who come from different countries, this study incorporates a critical approach, laying the groundwork for an analysis of Caribbean students' experiences in a way that should encourage institutions of higher education who enroll Caribbean students to develop programs, initiatives, and policies that will contribute to their success.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I take a critical look at the literature on international students which provides various angles that is applicable to the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students, as well as their experiences with race, at institutions of higher education in the United States. Because this is a study on Caribbean students within a U.S. context, most of the research included was conducted in the United States. To start, I will provide a framework around individuals who are considered international students in the U.S., the ways in which they are commodified, the challenges they face, the attention, or lack thereof, given to these challenges, and what is known about their transition to institutions of higher education in the United States. I will then discuss the academic literature on Caribbean students. Lastly, I will share effective strategies to work with students who come from other countries and the benefits of social transition programs. These themes provide further rationale for a study focused on Caribbean students' experiences and will challenge administrators, faculty, and staff who work closely with these students to think more critically about all aspects of their experiences.

#### **Research Questions**

Question 1: In what ways does race affect the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 2: What are the differences and commonalities in the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 3: In what ways do Caribbean students navigate their academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the U.S. that might enable an improved understanding of their experiences?

### **International Students in Higher Education**

International students are a growing segment of the total student population in the United States. They have been broadly defined as students who have left their home country to pursue education in another country. Specifically, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2017) defines international students as, “Anyone who is enrolled at an institution of higher education in the United States who is not a U.S. citizen, an immigrant (permanent resident) or refugee” (para. 3). In most cases, international students are expected to return to their home country unless they can find an employer that is willing to sponsor them for a non-immigrant visa (H1 B Visa), or they can apply for short-term optional practical training (OPT) upon successful completion of a bachelor’s or master’s degree (USCIS Foreign Academic Students, p. 1). Both of these options allow international students to stay in the United States for a period of one to six years, with exceptions granted above the six-year maximum for H1 Visa holders under the American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act. It is also worth noting that at the time of the visa application and entry into the U.S., international students must be able to prove non-immigrant intent. International students are not allowed to stay in the United States permanently after graduation and must be aware of these intricacies to ensure they stay in compliance with United States immigration laws.

International students enroll at high schools, community colleges, PWIs and HBCUs, and there are different reasons why they select certain institution type. Both Gobel (2012) and Markleim (2014) provide perspectives on this. Markleim (2014) shares that Federal data in year 2013 revealed that more than 73,000 international students enrolled in U.S. high schools which is motivated by academic reasons as international students target higher education in the United States. Gobel (2012) claims there is growing interest around international students attending community colleges as a way to improve English language skills, save money, and assist with adaption to the U.S. system of education. Factors that influence international students' institution choice are worth acknowledging as well because it varies based on the region of the world where the international students are coming from. For example, in a study exploring factors related to international students' graduate school choice, Ruby (2007) cites that the reputation of the institution played a significant role in influencing international students' choice but noted that, "European students were less influenced by reputation than students from South Asia" (p. 122). Hence, international students' enrollment at different types of institutions and the rational for choosing these institutions are important considerations for scholars who engage in research with these students.

College athletics play a role in bringing international students to institutions of higher education in the United States. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reports, "There are over 17,000 international student-athletes enrolled and competing at NCAA schools" (NCAA, 2017, para. 1). The NCAA reports that from 2010 to 2016, most Division 1 sports showed increases in international student athlete

participation (NCAA, 2017). These international student athletes experience challenges in their environments. For example, Frawley (2015) shares social support, dietary restrictions, and language as some of the barriers facing international student athletes. While Frawley (2015) shared strategies that could be implemented based on her research study interviewing international student athletes, there were no tangible examples of what athletic departments were doing to combat these challenges. More concerning is the fact that a review of educational databases reveal only a few studies (see Sato, Hodge, & Eckert, 2018; Steward, 2013) that share ways to enhance the experiences of international student athletes in the United States. Therefore, more attention is needed to fully understand the experiences of international student athletes at institutions of higher education in the United States.

Exchange visitor programs also bring international students to the United States. According to USCIS (2017), an exchange visitor is “authorized for those who intend to participate in an approved program for the purpose of teaching, instructing or lecturing, studying, observing, conducting research, consulting, demonstrating special skills, receiving training, or to receive graduate medical education or training” (para. 1). Exchange programs have become increasingly important because many institutions of higher education see student mobility or living and studying at a college or university in another country, as an important piece of their globalization efforts. Given the different roles of international students and their rationales for attending the various types of institutions, one cannot assume that they play a homogenous role at U.S. institutions of higher education and their increased presence should not be ignored.

## **Trends in International Students Enrollment**

According to the June 2017 Sevis report, “Over the course of the reporting year, the number of international students increased by 2 percent, growing from 1.16 million in May 2016 to 1.18 million in May 2017” (p. 1). Various organizations that report international students’ statistics (Open Doors, 2017; Sevis, 2017) reveal that international students enroll in bachelors, masters, and doctoral programs and the majority (57%) identify as male. Most international students pursuing a bachelor’s degree or higher are in science, technology, engineering, mathematics or business (Ruiz, 2014). Although international students who study in the U.S. come from all over the world, the majority come from China and India, which constitutes 362,368 and 206,698 students, respectively (Sevis, 2017). International associations, such as NAFSA (National Association of International Educators) have acknowledged the growth in international student enrollment over the years. There are various factors, including the reputation of U.S. institutions of higher education and value of U.S. degree in the home country, that contribute to the growth of international students attending institutions of higher education in the United States.

Still, it is worth noting that a few reports at the end of year 2017 have hinted at a decline in new international student enrollment at institutions of higher education in the United States (Fischer, 2017a; Saul, 2017). For example, Saul (2017) states, “The number of newly arriving international students declined an average of 7 percent in fall 2017, with 45 percent of campuses reporting drops in new international enrollment, according to a survey of nearly 500 campuses across the country by the Institute of International

Education. Experts cited an uncertain social and political climate in the United States as part of the decline” (para. 2). Similarly, Fischer (2017) cites a decline in the number of new first-time students from abroad (para. 3). Unfortunately, both Saul (2017) and Fischer (2017a) did not share any strategies on ways institutions of higher education could help combat this statistic. Yet, many would agree that the current national climate around immigration, which will be explored later in this literature review, has played a role in that decline.

Although a review of educational databased shows there is limited to no research that explores additional reasons for the decline in international student enrollment in the U.S., there are reports of factors beyond national politics. A recent article by the Triangle Business Journal (2018) reports that “Saudi Arabia and Brazil have slashed international programs, so fewer students from those countries are going abroad. Also, other countries- The United Kingdom, Canada and Australia to name a few- are looking to attract international students as the global competition stiffens” (para. 4). I see this as a new strategy where foreign countries are looking to attract international students while retaining their own talented students. Furthermore, there are reports of a decline from countries that have traditionally produced large numbers of international students to the United States. For example, there has been a reduction in the number of students from India studying computer science and engineering in the United States (McCarthy, 2018). Faculty, staff, and administrators who work closely with international students at U.S. institutions should think critically about these external factors and determine ways they

can create a climate where international students are attracted to pursue their education in the United States.

### **The Unfortunate Reality: Commodification of International Students**

A critical study on the experiences of any group of students who come from another country should examine the motives for recruiting them. Bevis (2002) claims international students diversify the student population in various ways, including raising the awareness of other countries and cultures, and allow domestic students to learn from a more global perspective in the classroom. Scholars who research international students support these claims, and unfortunately some fail to see how their views and perspectives commodify international students. For example, Hegarty (2014) states, “The number of international students present at a university makes a significant contribution to the personality of that institution, and also to its financial well-being. With the majority of international students paying full tuition, the importance of their presence in American academic life cannot be underscored” (p. 225). The problematic nature of these claims deserves to be exposed. Critical scholars should inquire about the ways in which higher education institutions give back to international students and create environments where they can thrive.

There are various reasons why these inquiries are important. Cho and Yu (2015) provide a baseline rationale when they state, “International students are heavily dependent on the host university in various ways for support” (p. 13). So, as institutions focus on the benefits of having international students on their campuses, an equal amount of attention should be given to ensure they are having enriching experiences because of

that perceived level of dependence. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. Alfatef (2016) criticizes colleges in the United States for largely recruiting international students as a source of revenue while paying little attention to these students' desires and requirements (p. 960). More research is needed around the ways in which institutions of higher education can be intentional in supporting international students. Additionally, I would recommend research that targets the unique needs of various subgroups of international students so that faculty, staff, and administrators can better support them while they pursue their studies.

There are some studies documenting international students' struggles as they transition to institutions of higher education in the United States (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Green, 2013; Ye & Inose, 2003). For example, Ye and Inose (2003) study found that "by leaving their countries of origin, international students are deprived of important others who have endorsed their sense of self in the past" (p. 24). This becomes even more challenging for international students when there are minimal efforts being made to support them at institutions of higher education. The American Council on Education (ACE) addresses this in its 2012 report when they state, "While efforts to recruit international students are on the rise, the data do not show a commensurate increase in support services for these students" (p. 5). This is further supported in the literature. Green (2013) alludes to U.S. campuses ramping up efforts to recruit international students without planning for the accompanying support services to ensure that international students are integrated into the campus community (p. 2). She states, "U.S. institutions naturally focus first on the benefits of internationalization to their own

students and faculty” (Green, 2013, p. 2). Structures like this make it difficult for international students to transition to universities if their best interests are not prioritized as first.

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. must prioritize internationalization efforts around resources that could contribute to the success of international students on their campuses. Choudaha (2016) urges institutions of higher education to invest in campus readiness by building a sustainable and an inclusive model of enrolling and integrating international students with local students and campus communities. A challenge for U.S. institutions will be to identify successful strategies that could be implemented to support international students in their higher education journey in the United States. Fortunately, there are studies that highlight effective strategies that could be utilized to positively impact the experiences of international students (Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005; Dandall & Yan, 2016; Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014; Mitchell et. al., 2007; Warren & Constantine, 2007; Yao, 2016) Some of the strategies mentioned in these studies will be shared in a separate section later in this literature review.

The commodification of international students spans beyond the cultural and financial benefits that institution of higher education receives. NAFSA (2017) conducted a series of analyses that details the economic impact of international students on the U.S. economy. NAFSA’s (2017) report states, “International students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$36.9 billion to the U.S. economy and support over 450,000 jobs. The economic contributions of international students are in addition to the

immeasurable academic and cultural values these students bring to campuses and local communities” (p. 1). Since U.S. policy makers tend to value economic contributions, and in the face of negative views of international students following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, NAFSA increased advocacy of international students by emphasizing their economic input. This was done to counter the belief that international students are using U.S. resources that should be reserved for U.S. students and in-state residents. Still, from a critical perspective, it is interesting to see the ways in which NAFSA markets the benefits of international students to the U.S economy on their websites. Their marketing strategy is organized in a way that allows the United States to build capital from their presence (see NAFSA International Student Economic Value). While NAFSA has been a leader in developing materials and trainings for university personnel to better support international students, a challenge for NAFSA would be to determine how to share, with the same passion, the ways in which the United States should create a welcoming environment for international students.

The impact that international students are having on the state economies and institutions of higher education is striking. It is possible that a significant decline in international students’ enrollment could have negative impacts on the financial well-being of U.S. institutions that enroll large numbers of international students, and the town or city where that institution is located. Moreover, loss of revenue from international students could have significant impact on State budgets. Yet, a review of educational databases reveals there are no current studies that outline the impact of the U.S economy if international student enrollment were to decline, which is currently happening. It is

imperative for international students to feel welcome and appreciated when they arrive at their respective institution of higher education. Both State officials and University leaders must be fully aware of the challenges experienced by international students as a prerequisite to designing programs and initiatives to help these students be successful in their new environment. If institutions of higher education are serious about supporting international students, it is important to understand their unique situation within these experiences.

### **Perceived Challenges of International Students in Higher Education**

Given the increased international recruitment efforts by U.S. institutions (Hegarty, 2014), and the fact that the U.S. has continued to be the top destination for international students (Sevis, 2017), international students at institutions of higher education in the U.S. has been a frequent area of study. For instance, there are countless peer-reviewed articles and studies that use qualitative and mixed methods to examine the experiences of international students in higher education (see Alfatel, 2016; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Cho & Yu, 2015; Constantine et al., 2005; Glass, 2012; Hegarty, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Manyika, 2001; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sherry et al., 2010; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Yan & Sendall, 2016; Yao, 2016; Ye & Inose, 2003). A careful examination of these studies reveals that higher education institutions must do more to ensure international students have a successful transition to colleges, and additional efforts are needed to help them navigate life in a new country and institution. Also, given the differences that may exist among students from different

regions of the world, specific studies that address the needs of students based on country of origin is needed.

Despite international students' excitement and perceived readiness to study in the U.S., they experience a myriad of academic, cultural, and social challenges. As such, U.S. colleges and universities must closely examine the challenges that international students face, which has been thoroughly documented in the literature. For example, Gautum et al. (2016), in their attempt to inform academia about international students' experience reveal that, "language barriers, loneliness, homesickness, identity issues, changes in eating habits and other gastronomic adjustments, financial setbacks and racial discrimination" as some of the primary obstacles facing international students at U.S. higher education institutions (p. 503). Given the focus on Caribbean students in this study, I will explore immigration laws, racial discrimination and identity issues, and the problematic nature of acculturation as core issues that could potentially affect Caribbean students. However, before I do so, I want to highlight the Caribbean region and the literature on Caribbean students.

### **The Caribbean Region and Caribbean Students**

Although the Caribbean is usually regarded as a sub-region of North America, students who come from that region carry unique identities and cultural upbringings that differ from American and other international students. The Caribbean has strong connections to slavery, European colonization, and the plantation system. People from the Caribbean make up a significant portion of the immigrant Black population in the United States (Rong & Preissle, 1998). Rong and Preissle (1998) present a demographic

profile of the immigrant Black population and reports that of the 1.6 million foreign-born people of African origin living in the United States in the 1990s, the majority were non-Hispanic Caribbean Blacks (mostly Grenadians, Haitians, Jamaicans, and Trinidadians and Tobagonians) and Africans (mostly Ethiopians, Ghanaians, Nigerians, and South Africans). Similar trends have continued today. Anderson (2015) states, “A record 3.8 million black immigrants live in the United States today, more than four times the number in 1980. Black immigrants now account for 8.7% of the nation’s black population, nearly triple their share in 1980” (para. 1). This growth is expected to continue into the future with the Pew Research Center Analysis predicting that by 2060, 16.5% of U.S. blacks will be immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2013).

The Immigration Act and Nationality Act of 1965 was one of the driving factors that sparked the growth of individuals from the Caribbean region moving to the United States. This is because the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, “eliminated the various national criteria, supposedly putting people of all nationality on an equal footing for immigration to the United States” (Center for Immigration Studies, 1995). Given this stipulation, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 provided an opportunity for individuals from the Caribbean to more freely immigrate to the United States without the additional barriers. Still, there were challenges for Caribbean immigrants arriving in the United States for education. Morrison and Bryan (2014) reveal that poor educational outcomes, low academic achievement, and high dropout rates of Afro-Caribbean students were attributed to racial discrimination, inappropriate assessment that led to placement in the wrong curriculum levels, and a lack of parental involvement. Morrison and Bryan

(2014) also point to other studies (Mahoney, 2002; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers, & Jackson, 2008; Winer, 2006) claiming that, “Caribbean immigrant students typically experience acculturation stress that manifests in poor psychological wellbeing, including feeling of isolation, anxiety and depression, identity confusion, difficulty making friends, and behavioral and family problems” (p. 440). As more Caribbean students immigrate to the United States to attend institutions of higher education, additional research is needed to more fully capture their experiences.

A search for recent studies that examines the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States and ways to effectively work with them is almost nonexistent. Most of the studies that exist are written from a deficit perspective, dated, or have taken place outside the United States. This is concerning because the literature points to a series of educational concerns that exist among Caribbean students in the United States. For example, Morrison and Bryan (2014) state, “Although Caribbean students come from countries where English is the medium of instruction in the school, many have difficulty adjusting to the American Standard English used in classroom instruction” (p. 441). There are studies (see Gopaul-McNichol, 1993 and Seaton et al., 2008) that allude to teachers interpreting Caribbean students’ indigenous styles of expression as language deficits. This exposes the ways educators are not always culturally responsive in their pedagogical approach and may lack useful strategies to work with diverse students in an academic environment, including students who are coming from the Caribbean region. As such, more research around resources and strategies are needed to better equip educators who work with Caribbean students.

Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) conducted one of the most forward-thinking qualitative studies on Caribbean students. They utilized both constructionism and subjectivism epistemologies, as well as the interpretive framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze the voices of 14 Caribbean students (10 females and 4 males) who identified racially as Afro-Caribbean. Anchored in themes focused on pedagogical elements, programmatic efforts, campus demographics, and documentation requirement, the study found that, “students perceived an overgeneralization and homogenous institutional context that marginalized their experiences and contributed to their identity” (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014, p. 602). More importantly, Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) highlight the ways in which these students thrive at their respective institution, which include, “selective assimilation, modification of language and accent, and separation of identities” (p. 606). Unfortunately, the voices of Caribbean students from Dutch, Spanish, and French speaking islands were not included. Hence, a future research opportunity would be to include and juxtapose the voices of Spanish and French-speaking Caribbean students with that of English-speaking Caribbean students.

### **Immigration Laws and International Students**

One of the biggest challenges facing international students is the increasingly tense debate around immigration in the United States. Immigration has long impacted the experiences of international students (Akanwa, 2015; Bevis & Lucas, 2007). It is considered a contentious topic in the U.S. because it is perceived by many as influencing core social issues such as terrorism, unemployment, crime, and discrimination. For example, Kephart’s (2005) study on immigration and terrorism found that of the 94

foreign-born terrorists who operated in the United States, about two-thirds committed immigration fraud prior to or in conjunction with taking part in terrorist activity (p. 5). The results of such a study and the manner in which Kephart (2005) shares it portrays a negative view of people coming from different countries, including students from the Caribbean islands. Consequently, because of this fear-ridden narrative, immigration laws are often at the forefront of state and national politics. To get a full picture of the ways immigration in the U.S. impacts international students, it is important to consider the historical perspectives shared by Bevis and Lucas (2007). They state:

America's immigration policies have affected foreign student enrollment from the beginning. Historically, regulations and rules employed to enforce or restrict immigration have reflected the political and social climate of the nation- as the country's mode shifted, so did its policies. In most cases, although foreign students were exempt from many of these restrictions, they still had to deal with many of the same logistical issues (and biases) as any other immigrant. (p. 56)

Of course, these larger immigration policies impact policies implemented by institutions of higher education, which ultimately leads to increased stress and anxiety among international students. In further exploring historical examples, Bevis and Lucas (2007) point to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Scott Act of 1888, both of which halted immigration from China. Although different in many ways, these policies restricted Chinese nationals from immigrating to the United States. Specifically, the Chinese Exclusion Act prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers and the Scott Act, which was built upon the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibited future travelers from returning (Bevis & Lucas, 2007). Bevis and Lucas (2007) point out that, "The loss of

foreign students was one of the many repercussions of the new restrictions” (p. 57).

Hence, as acknowledged earlier, immigration laws could negatively impact the presence of international students at U.S. institutions.

Akanwa (2015), in his analysis of the challenges that international students face in western developed countries, also points to immigration laws in the U.S. as a negative factor that have long affected international students’ experiences in higher education. In connecting to the historical significance and implications of immigration laws, he shares, “International Students contact on record did not start until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The American immigration laws did not make U.S. institutions a choice destination for international students” (p. 272). He reminds higher education faculty and administrators of the need to, “understand the differences and uniqueness of international students as a population that is entirely different from domestic students. An understanding of the differences that characterize this student population should be reflected in the ways professors and administrators relate to and work with international students” (p. 281). Indeed, there is a need to pay attention to the ways in which immigration laws may impact international students after they arrive in the United States. From my personal experience as a new international student entering the U.S. in 2001, I often felt like my relationship with the institution I attended was transactional and that reminded me of the power that immigration laws had on my experience. For example, there was a lot of focus on travel paperwork, such as the signing of the I-20 Form (Certificate of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status) before one leaves the country, that governs international students at U.S. institutions. Unfortunately, these processes take away from the authentic

personal relationships that could be formed among administrators, faculty, and international students.

Disappointingly, similar disastrous immigration policies have continued today. For example, in 2010, the state of Arizona introduced Senate Bill 1070 which, “empowered police to detain individuals who were not able to prove their citizenship upon request” (Toomey et al., 2014). As a higher education professional who resided in the state of Arizona at the time, I would argue that the law legalized racial and ethnic profiling by law enforcement. Furthermore, there is a lot negative rhetoric in the United States today around immigration, including the proposal to build a wall along the southern border of the United States, the elimination of family-based migration, and the criminalization of persons who are fleeing their country in hopes of a better life. Hence, there should be no surprise around the decline in new international student enrollment for the first time since the September 11 attacks (Sauls, 2017).

Although international students are not always impacted by these policies, it creates fear as they face immigration uncertainty. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007), in their study on international students in higher education, hint at that fear when they state, “Information regarding immigration regulations and visa requirements are areas of great concern for most, if not all, international students” (p. 321). Given the immigration debates in the U.S., international students will be forced to navigate bigoted immigration policies that may negatively impact their ability to travel, perpetuate on-campus employment discrimination, and create an underlying foundation for xenophobic behavior. The juxtaposition of challenges that originate in their home country and the

ones inherited when they arrived in the U.S. further complicates the experiences of international students.

### **Racial Discrimination and Identity Issues**

Racial discrimination and identity issues may directly impact the experiences of Caribbean students. There are studies that compare racial identity concerns among international students in the U.S. and other countries that further illuminate the complexities that are unique to the United States because of racism. For example, Manyika's (2001) qualitative study on negotiating identities: African students in British and American Universities provides a detailed analysis on the discrimination faced by Black international students. Manyika (2001) indicates that there was a lot of discrimination towards Blacks, and towards Black-African students on many campuses in the United States. The core findings of Manyika's study, which compares Black international students' experiences in two countries, is worth highlighting because of how it may apply to the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students to institutions of higher education in the United States. Manyika writes:

Identity negotiation processes are informed by a person's background experiences in addition to the specific contexts of race, class, and nationality in the host country of study. While the data reveal both similarities and differences between student experiences in the UK and the US, the most significant differences emerge around issues of race. In America, the historical legacy of segregation and racism is dominant in the African student experience whilst in the UK, it is primarily the national and class constructs which are dominant in the African student experience. (p. 127)

The experiences of Black international students will look different because of the potential racial discrimination they may experience. Blake (2006) reports that a large number of Black-African students, even at historically Black institutions, were discriminated against by instructors and students alike. Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) acknowledge the ways in which this may impact Afro-Caribbean students when they state, “Afro-Caribbean international students often become engrossed in a complex racial and ethnic dialogue wherein they are thrust into homogenous categorizations forcing them to negotiate their Afro-Caribbean self with other identities perceived by others” (p. 595). This should raise a sense of urgency for higher education administrators and more attention should be given to the experiences of international students who identify as students of color.

In researching international students’ experiences, one should also consider the correlation between country of birth and the extent of racial discrimination. Specifically, Carter (1991) argues, and I agree, that international students from Europe may have experienced less of a contrast in cultural patterns of behavior and value systems which could allow for a smoother transition. This is because, “The value of White middle-class Americans, the dominant group in the United States, has been found to be characterized by a belief in mastery over nature, future time, doing-oriented activity, and individual relationships. These cultural patterns form the context for many social and human interactions in the United States” (p. 165). Hence, international students who identify as White may have an easier transition to a PWI than international students of color.

This was reinforced in a study by Yeh and Inose (2003) where the results indicate, “European international students were significantly less likely to experience acculturative distress than were students from the geographic regions of Asia, Africa and Latin/Central America” (p. 23). To provide further context, they highlight that, “All of our European participants were White racially, which may have helped them ‘fit in’ more easily to American society” (p. 23). Likewise, Lee and Rice (2007) did a comprehensive qualitative study with 24 international students from 15 countries and found that students from different countries reported different rates of discrimination. Specifically, they state, “Not all international students are subject to the same hardship- students from Western and English-speaking countries in our study especially encountered minimal to no discrimination compared to students from other regions” (p. 405). They allude to students from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East, reporting considerably more discrimination than students from Europe, Canada, and New Zealand (p. 393). Therefore, it is critical to differentiate between the experiences of White international students, and those from other minoritized descent. This gets at the importance of a study focused on the experiences of Caribbean students, where the majority of the population are students of color but there are still social and cultural differences that exist within the Caribbean.

Constantine et al. (2005) share the role that race and racial discrimination can play in the experiences of Black-African international students at PWIs. They interviewed 12 African international students at a PWI and found that participants generally indicated prejudice or discriminatory treatment by others, including being called names and racial slurs by White Americans (p. 60). This is critical when thinking about the experiences of

Caribbean students because most of them may not have experience with racial discrimination prior to arrival in the United States (Lee & Opio, 2011), and so may not have had the opportunity to develop resources to cope with such situations. This could potentially leave Caribbean students grappling with their identity as they transition to life in a new country where they look similar to others in that culture, but still have unique differences in their upbringing, cultural views, and overall way of life.

### **Acculturation - A Critical Approach**

Research involving international students has often utilized or acknowledged a framework that is centered on acculturation (see Alfatel, 2016; Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Gomez et al., 2014; Smart & Smart, 1995). Berry (1997) describes acculturation as, “the cultural changes that result from group encounters” (p. 6). His acculturation model expands across 4 stages (assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization), each with varying degree of emphasis on one’s preference to maintain cultural identity. Berry explains the differences between them as follows:

From the point of view of non-dominant groups, when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and see daily interaction with other cultures, the *Assimilation* strategy is defined. In contrast, when individuals place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others, the *Separation* alternative is defined. When there is an interest in both maintaining one’s original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups, *Integration* is the option. Finally, when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) then *Marginalization* is defined. (p. 9)

Even with Berry's attempts to clearly differentiate the acculturation stages, Hermans and Kempen (1998) have been critical of the overall idea of acculturation. Their critique has centered around the notion that acculturation assumes a universal model that fails to take into account important factors such as country of origin, historical context, and the ethnic group in question. I agree with their critique, which is one of the reasons why the theoretical framework for this study is Postcolonial theory. As a qualitative researcher, Postcolonial theory gave me a unique lens to study the experiences of Caribbean students by problematizing acculturation and illuminating the role that the unique history and culture of the Caribbean plays in the transition of Caribbean students to institutions of higher education in the United States. It provided an additional angle at which to re-think acculturation. Postcolonial theory's intersections to this study is discussed in more detail in the methods chapter of this dissertation.

A few studies and peer-reviewed articles have started the process of re-thinking the concept of acculturation as it relates to the experiences of international students. For example, Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik (2013) share an expanded model of acculturation, and reminds us that, "Migrants from non-European backgrounds must come to terms with their own ethnicity after arriving in the United States or other Western countries. Individuals who belonged to the majority ethnic group in their countries of origin- such as those from China, India, and other Asian countries- may suddenly be cast in the role of ethnic minorities" (p. 741). Similarly, Ram and Bhatia (2009), in their piece centered on a critical approach to acculturation, have expressed a desire to re-examine acculturation in the wake of "transnational migration and global

movements” (p. 140). By interrogating previous research on acculturation, Ram and Bhatia (2009) ask a very important question, “How do we account for the larger structures of history, politics, and socio-cultural forces that position individuals and impact their acculturation journey?” (p. 143). This question gets at the urgency to clearly account for the experiences of specific ethnic groups within the acculturation discourse. Hence, a study on the academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences of Caribbean students should incorporate a theoretical framework that accounts for this dynamic.

### **Relevant Approaches to Work with International Students**

Institutions of higher education in the U.S. often struggle with strategies to support international students, particularly those from minoritized countries. There are only a few studies that acknowledge the different needs among students who come from different countries to study in the United States. For example, both Warren and Constantine (2007) and Boafo-Arthur (2013) have made recommendations for working with international students with minoritized backgrounds. Specifically, Warren and Constantine (2007) advise counselor educators to, “encourage Black-African international college students to share their belief about the etiology of their adjustment concerns and the best ways to alleviate them” and “consider providing post-migratory information to Black-African international students regarding U.S. social customs and norms” (p. 221). Similarly, Boafo-Arthur (2013) states, “It is important for higher education practitioners to be intentional in providing opportunities for foreign born Black students and native-born Black students to interact with and learn from each other” (p. 1031). Although these recommendations are useful, specific suggestions are not provided

to staff in student affairs and global education units, such as career centers, campus housing, international student offices, and new student orientation that work with international students from minoritized backgrounds. Given the limited recommendations for professionals working with students from minoritized countries, additional studies are needed to assist educators who may interact with that population.

More broadly, there have been studies that highlight ways to help international students adjust to life in the United States. Gómez et al. (2014) investigate leisure involvement connection to successful adjustment to university life by international students and establish that international students' acculturative process was positively associated with participation in leisure activities, such as sports and social events. They mention that, "Acculturation was found to have a significant inverse relationship with leisure constraints, suggesting that as international students become more acculturated they perceive fewer constraints" (p. 7). In their findings, they recommend that, "On-campus sports and on-campus and off-campus socialization opportunities should be included into international student orientations" (p. 21). Given my earlier critique of acculturation, I believe further context is needed in their study. Still, their findings reveal that units across colleges and universities should play a role in the adjustment experiences of international students.

Baba and Hosoda (2014), in their study on better understanding the role of social support in predicting cross-cultural adjustment among international students mention that social support partially mediated the relationship between stress factors and cross-cultural adjustment for international college students. In defining social support, they point to

James et al. (2004) who defines it as, “perceived availability of potential social resources which includes appraisal support (advice and discussion), belonging support (identification with a social network) and tangible support (material aid)” (p. 4). Their findings claim that, “social support was positively related to cross-cultural adjustment, after controlling for each of the stress factors (i.e., academic pressure, financial stress, homesickness, perceived discrimination, and social disconnectedness), except for culture shock” (p. 11). What will make Baba and Hosoda’s findings challenging to actualize is the unique upbringing of international students which must be underscored when considering factors such as cross-cultural adjustment. Still, administrators who work closely with international students must determine ways to incorporate social support in their work with international students.

An important consideration for faculty and staff who work with international students is to determine what is needed for that student sub-group to feel like they belong in their educational environment. Yao (2016), in her qualitative study on Chinese international students’ roommate relations, emphasized the importance of sense of belonging and connected it to Chinese international student’s success. She states, “Sense of belonging is particularly important for students from underrepresented populations since feeling of belonging elicit a sense of connectedness with, affiliation for, and acceptance by the larger campus community” (p. 764). Within the study’s findings, she indicates, “More attention must be given to Chinese students’ interpersonal relationships with domestic students, particularly when considering the role of daily cross-cultural interactions in residential living” (p. 762). Given that one area of focus in this study was

on the social experiences of Caribbean students, heeding Yao's considerations may present potential implications around social experiences in residential spaces for Caribbean students.

Indeed, the experiences of Caribbean students in residential environment was mentioned by a few participants in this study (see Chapter VI) as they discussed how they navigated their social experiences. Social programs designed by residential staff and the opportunity for some Caribbean student participants to hold leadership positions were integral part of their undergraduate experience. There is additional work to support this as well. During my pilot study to learn about the self-described experiences of international students at a PWI, I found that international students with American roommates and suitemates acclimate better to U.S. culture and the cultural nuances in the residence halls because of the informal ways they were able to learn about American culture through their roommate. Hence, staff who work in campus housing departments must be intentional in selecting roommate pairs, as this may directly impact the social experiences of international students.

Lastly, higher education professionals must be aware of the similarities and differences in the experiences of both domestic and international students. In comparing the experiences of international students and domestic students, there are studies that confirm first-year international students and American students had similar concerns with emotional issues, such as anxiety and depression (Mitchell et al., 2007). Specifically, Mitchell et al. state, "Several issues that were of more concern for international students and U.S. students seem to cluster around academics, and international students were more

likely to be diagnosed with an academic problem than were U.S. students” (p. 127). Both groups’ most prolific concern in regard to mental health was relationship problems, though international students were more concerned with relationships with faculty than American students (Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014). Hence, international and American students, though different in many aspects, may experience the same emotional and transitional challenges as they embark on their higher education journey. As institutions of higher education work to support international students, this is an important factor that must be considered.

### **Supporting First-Year International Students**

The first year in college generates excitement among students, faculty, and university administrators. It is also a crucial year when students need the most support. A review of the literature in higher education reveals that students’ first year in college plays a critical role in their transition to college, academic and social integration, and rates of persistence (Tinto, 1993). Consequently, it is important to support students in this time of transition by offering intentional programs and initiatives. This is particularly needed for students of color who come from different countries. Jones (2005) states, “Many minority students find campus environments to be drastically different from what they expected” (p. 144). Arriving in a new country for higher education studies adds an additional layer of complication for students of color. A recent study by the Interfaith Youth Core reveals that 85% of first-year students arrived on campus expecting the climate to be welcoming to diverse religious and non-religious perspectives, but by the end of the year the same students report perceiving their campus to be less welcoming

than expected (Pennamon, 2018). While the number of first-year international students is on the decline (Saul, 2017), it is still important to assess how best to meet these students' needs.

In his book chapter on fostering first-year success of underrepresented minorities, Hrabowski (2005) highlights, "Now, more than ever before, it is important to examine issues related to the first-year success of underrepresented minority students" (p. 125). Although written 14 years ago, similar sentiments are echoed today and may be exasperated for students international students given the racial and immigration climates in the United States today. To combat this, some institutions have started to lean on First Year Experience (FYE) programs, or initiatives designed to help students transition from high school to college, as a way to positively influence their transition to college. Unfortunately, FYE programs, whether it be co-curricular or academic based, are not always sensitive to the needs of students who come from other countries (Roy, 2013; Yan & Sendall, 2016). Yan and Sendall (2016) point to one reason for this when they state, "Although most FYE programs in various colleges and universities share similar goals, institutions typically customize their programs to align with their university's mission and to reflect the particular needs of their student population" (pp. 36-37). Given that the needs of international students may be different than domestic students, it is difficult for universities to utilize a universal approach to meet their students' needs. Hence, an opportunity exists for institutions of higher education to analyze the experiences of international students within FYE programs and determine the optimal programmatic strategy to meet their needs.

I believe FYE programs could help support students who come from other countries by providing resources that could help them thrive at their institution. Cho and Yu (2015) state, “University support is important for international students’ successful lives in the host university and society” (p. 12). This alludes to the need for institutions of higher education to continually explore creative ways to support international students. Sherry et al. (2010) also highlight this in their study examining the experiences of international students at the University of Toledo. They recommended that U.S. institutions, “provide greater opportunities for international students to become involved in the University and local community, enhance cross cultural understanding, and raise the profile of international students on campus (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 44). More specifically, the study found that, “Many respondents did not feel that people at The University of Toledo had understood their culture” (p. 39). Consequently, the host university plays an integral role in the successful transition of international students as they navigate life in a new country and institution.

There are some studies that have explored unique approaches different university departments could implement to support international students. A few of these studies focused on the positive impact libraries could have on the experiences of international students in the United States. For example, Flierl, Howard, Zakharov, Zwicky, and Winer (2018) used a replication of a mixed-methods study at one Australian and two U.S. universities to investigate how libraries can support the transition of first-year international undergraduate students to a large research university. They found that, “libraries should focus on basic information for these students, such as the locations of

physical space; should develop teaching and learning rather than marketing strategies; and should work to integrate the library holistically into programs and courses for international students” (p. 535). Such strategies may be useful for students who are acclimating to a new academic environment. Furthermore, the Flierl et al. study emphasized the need for institutions to take a collaborative approach and include librarians in their attempt to support students who come from different countries.

A study conducted by Susan Avery (2017) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on assessing pre-research assignments of first-year international students is worth highlighting as well. She evaluated the experiences of first-year international students through concept maps as they engaged in the research process. The study’s two core findings that may be applicable to librarians as they work with first-year international students are, “assignment expectations must be clear and directions for completing them should be given in multiple formats” and “building strong relationships with academic departments that serve international students is crucial in assuring that research assignments and expectations are both realistic and understandable” (p. 335). As the work being done at university libraries continues to evolve, attention should be given to how other departments at institutions of higher education can meet the needs of students who come from other countries.

### **Conclusion**

This literature review outlines who are considered international students, recent trends in international student enrollment, and the ways in which international students are commodified in the United States. The discussion on the commodification of

international students discussed in this literature has not been addressed by scholars and researchers and it is designed to spark deep thought around upper-level university administrators who work with international students on their campus. This literature review also provides insights on international students' experiences with racial discrimination and the impact of immigration laws has on their experiences. A deviation from the traditional acculturation model that has been used by many scholars and researcher who study the experiences of international students is recommended in this literature review because of the ways it fails to take into consideration other aspects of an international student experience. The above angles and themes create a groundwork for this study on the academic, cultural, social, and racial experiences of Caribbean students.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The existing literature, the current racial and immigration climates, and the most recent decline in new international student enrollment in the United States indicate a need to examine the experiences of international students from minoritized countries studying in the United States. This critical qualitative study explored the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students, as well as the ways race impacts their experiences through in-depth one on one semi-structured interviews and a focus group. Hatch (2002) states, “Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspective of those living in it” (p. 7). As a qualitative researcher, I listened intently to the experiences of the Caribbean student participants to identify and share relevant themes that I hope will allow those who work closely with them to be more aware of their experiences.

This awareness is important because more needs to be known about Caribbean students’ experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States. Harper and Kuh (2007) state, “We endorse the use of qualitative approaches because they can help answer some of the complex, vexing questions that concern various stakeholders in higher education” (p. 6). Narratives of Caribbean students can provide specifics about their experiences and increase faculty, staff, and administrators’ understanding of the multiple factors that influence their experiences, including the ways in which they thrive.

In addition, it provides a more accurate depiction around the connection, or lack thereof, between what stakeholders are saying about Caribbean students' experiences and the reality of their experiences. Hence, this study serves as a reality checkpoint on Caribbean students' experiences. Harper and Kuh (2007) capture the ways in which this study accomplished this when they state:

Qualitative methods cannot answer every assessment question, but they can be used alone or in concert with quantitative approaches to help explain in more detail what different groups of students are learning and experiencing and, equally important, the meaning students and others make of collegiate life and the various factors that affect institutional quality. (p. 12)

In this chapter, I will explain the findings from a pilot study where I interviewed six international students about their residential experience at a PWI. Reflecting on the findings, I will share the ways my experience with the pilot study influenced the framing of this study. Then, I will discuss the grounding of this work around a critical theory paradigm, the research approach and design, theoretical framework (Postcolonial theory), recruitment strategy, participant selection criteria, participant's biography, data transcription and analysis, establishing trustworthiness, as well as the study's potential benefits to participants. Finally, I will end by discussing the ways in which the data collected in this study will be presented in the subsequent chapters.

### **Research Questions**

Question 1: In what ways does race affect the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 2: What are the differences and commonalities in the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 3: In what ways do Caribbean students navigate their academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the U.S. that might enable an improved understanding of their experiences?

### **Results of Pilot Study**

As part of the requirement for a qualitative inquiry course in the spring of 2017, I received IRB approval to conduct a pilot study where I interviewed six international students from various countries around the world to learn about their residential experiences as a first-year student at a PWI. Specifically, I wanted to know the ways in which residence life staff could promote positive interactions between first-year undergraduate international students and domestic students living in the residence halls. I was surprised at the amount of details that participants shared about their cultural background and the various ways I was able to make connections with them as a researcher. All participants who I interviewed for this study were excited to learn that I was paying attention to the residential experience of first-year undergraduate international students on college campuses. They were even more excited to know that I am a former international student from the Caribbean who had lived in the residence halls for four years as an undergraduate student and, at the time of the pilot study, was employed in a housing department at a large PWI in the Southeast region of the United States. The participants knew that I had basic knowledge about their residential experience and the struggles they may have faced as they experience life in a new country.

After carefully transcribing and coding the data from the individual interviews, the following themes emerged which were closely tied to my research questions: (1) Roommates/Suitemate Influence, (2) The Resident Advisor Impact, (3) Family Influence/Past Travel Experience, and (4) Campus organizations and offices. Specifically, I learned that international students with American roommates were more likely to get acclimated to U.S. culture, Resident Advisors played an instrumental role in creating welcoming environments for international students in residential spaces, and international students who had family studying in the United States were more familiar with navigating life at their respective University. In my findings, it was clear that research beyond the residential experience of students who come from different regions of the world was needed. Participants shared, without me prompting, about their experiences in the classroom, challenges around language even with their ability to speak fluent English, identity and racial issues, and the impact of immigration laws on their experiences. In this study, I made an intentional effort to address all these elements as it relates to the experiences of Caribbean students at U.S. institutions of higher education.

Glesne (2016) states, “A pilot study is useful for trying out many aspects of the intended research. It helps you learn whether the concept of interest to you is of interest to the participant” (p. 32). This pilot study confirmed this research topic was of interest to international students, which further sparked my enthusiasm to continue engaging in this work with a focus on Caribbean students. It also confirmed the need to do more targeted research around the experiences of international students since different groups of students had unique experiences based on their upbringing. Hence, this study is an

offspring of this pilot study as I seek to learn more about the themes that emerged, particularly as it relates to the experiences of Caribbean students. During the pilot study, I found that I immediately connected to the two students I interviewed who were from the Caribbean. We joked about the differences between Caribbean and U.S. upbringings, and even exchanged some wry amusement around always being thought of as African American when in fact we are not. The two main limitations from my pilot study were the fact that most of the students interviewed identified as males, and the perspectives were limited to one large University in the southeast region of the United States. As I framed this current dissertation research, I addressed these limitations by casting a wider recruitment net, being mindful of the selection criteria so a more diverse perspective is captured and delving deeper into some of the topics that arose from the pilot study.

### **Paradigm/Epistemology**

Hatch (2002) recommends that attention should be given to methodological and substantive theories during the qualitative design process. Hence, qualitative researchers often situate their study within a particular research paradigm. The idea of a research paradigm grew from Thomas Kuhn (1962) who defined it as common beliefs, agreements, and understanding about how problems should be interpreted and addressed. Building upon Kuhn's (1962) perspectives, Glesne (2016) defines paradigm as, "a framework or philosophy of science that makes assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, the kinds of questions to explore, and how to go about doing so" (p. 5). Identifying a research paradigm is particularly important for any large-scale research project. In this study, I took an emancipatory approach with critical social justice aims.

My academic trainings in cultural foundations of education and my professional work in global education have influenced my decision to take this critical approach, which aligns with a critical research paradigm.

Shields (2012) writes, “Critical research begins with the premise that a researcher’s role is not to describe the world as it is, but also to demonstrate what needs to be changed” (p. 3). Critical research was initially influenced by Marxist thinkers and scholars from the Institute for Social Research (also known as the Frankfurt school) but has since grown to include theoretical perspectives that illuminates inequality. Giroux (2017) eloquently connects their work with the emancipatory goals of this study when he states, “The Frankfurt School stressed the importance of critical thinking by arguing that it is a constitutive feature of the struggle for self-emancipation and social change” (p. 32). By being critical thinkers, both scholars and students are able to better detect the ways dominant systems and structures infiltrate schools and can then work to dismantle them. It also allows minoritized students who have been oppressed to think critically about their lived experiences.

The knowledge that was produced from this critical qualitative study has the potential to alleviate some of the oppression that Caribbean students face at institutions of higher education because they were empowered to tell their truth regarding their experiences at U.S. institutions. Fay (1987) claims that critical research, “Stimulate oppressed people to rationally scrutinize all aspects of their lives to reorder their collective existence on the basis of the understanding it provides, which will ultimately change social policy and practice” (p. 34). This qualitative study provided an avenue for

Caribbean student participants to utilize such as an approach as they reflected on their collegiate experience. Glesne (2016) introduces standpoint epistemologies as a link to this approach when she states:

Standpoint epistemologies are positioned in the experiences, values, and interests of a group that has traditionally been oppressed and excluded (women, gays, lesbians, people of color, the colonized, etc.). From those standpoints, researchers critique and reconstruct narratives of dominant groups, exposing ways in which they have been racists, masculinist, straight, Eurocentric, and so forth. (p. 11)

Given my positionalities, I believe I am uniquely qualified to ask critical questions that reveal important aspects of Caribbean student participants' collegiate experiences, extracting an introspective analysis and perspective that may have otherwise gone unexplored or ignored. It is the revelation of these perspectives that starts the emancipatory journey for the Caribbean student participants.

By allowing a critical theory paradigm to guide my research approach with Caribbean students, I challenged social structures and norms that exist in the U.S. that perpetuate xenophobic behavior and beliefs. I referenced in chapter one that on January 12, 2018, President Donald Trump publicly questioned why America would want immigrants from Haiti and Africa, which he referred to as "shithole" countries, and instead recommended getting immigrants from (predominantly White) countries like Norway. It is shameful and utter ignorance that an American president would refer to Africa as a country and that some individuals condone these comments. It is also disturbing that others fail to see the problematic nature of such statements or the ways in which they may negatively affect students who are coming from different countries. Such

comments further justify why a critical qualitative study exploring Caribbean student's experiences was needed. I say this because a Caribbean island was mentioned in President Donald Trump's comment, and the Caribbean region is mainly comprised of people of color. The latter is true even for Caribbean islands that are United States territories, such as Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin islands. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which Caribbean students continue to be resilient in the wake of these racist comments.

I see critical pedagogy as being central to the goals and purpose of my work with Caribbean students. Critical pedagogy has been defined as a view of education that develops and applies concepts of critical theory to the field of education with the goal of challenging dominant positions (Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008). It is worth learning the ways in which White dominance impacts Caribbean students. Levinson et al. (2011) define domination as, "the condition in which some people are unfree, unable to realize their full human dignity in society, and unable to have fair access to the basic social and material goods of a society" (p. 11). Frankly, it is disgusting to see how this is manifested today and the ways in which it may negatively impact Caribbean students. For example, some people in power anecdotally claim that immigrants are criminals and are largely responsible for the high crime rates and murders in the United States. Those who make these claims often site groups such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS)-13 international criminal gang to justify their comments. I believe the racist nature of these statements are clear and should be exposed.

By taking a critical approach to my work, I empowered the Caribbean student participants in this study by amplifying their voices. An epistemological approach centered on critical theory counters the negative rhetoric associated with immigrants, providing an opportunity to make meaning from both the participants' and researcher's perspectives of what is being shared. Bellows (2011) captures such an approach when he states, "Immigrants tend to be highly entrepreneurial, creating jobs here in the United States. While they are only 12 percent of the U.S. population, immigrants represent 16.7 percent of all new business owners in the United States" (para. 2). In fact, at a recent global education symposium at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I learned that 40% of fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants (S. Rao, personal communication, March 20, 2019). This supports Bellows's (2011) claims that immigrants play an important part in keeping the U.S. competitive on the global level in technology advanced industries, fill the niche where the domestic supply of workers are limited, and increase the accessibility and affordability of many services.

Having research that reveals the experiences of Caribbean students may encourage faculty, staff, and administrators to focus on the positive aspects of Caribbean students and the ways in which they are able to thrive. The findings from this research study, which are shared in Chapters IV, V, and VI capture these perspectives for Caribbean students. Kincheloe et al. (2012) further portrays my approach and thinking around the ways critical research can accomplish this when they state:

Critical research can be understood best in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name “critical” must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label “political” and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness. (p. 164)

Because of the critical nature and approach that framed this study, the results of it have already started to underscore the often ignored reality that though Caribbean students experience challenges and they have remained resilient at institutions of higher education in the United States.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

Postcolonial theory is the theoretical framework used to analyze the narratives of the Caribbean student participants. Villaverde (2008) states, “Theory is a comprehensive explanation of any phenomenon or of the relationship between phenomena that facilitates more profound understanding of any condition. Theory can provide a set of principles to organize one’s thinking and actions” (p. 52). My decision to select postcolonial theory as the theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the belief that historical events that have impacted the Caribbean region can strengthen my capacity to investigate the nuanced experiences of Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate education in the United States. A close reading of Caribbean history suggests that genocide, slavery, immigration, and rivalry between world powers have greatly influenced the region. Murphy (2018) states, “Narratives of the European destruction of the Caribbean’s indigenous populations, beginning with the famously vivid sixteenth-century account of Bartolome de las Casas, continue to color historical analysis of the region” (p. 17). The

Caribbean has a long history that involves colonial struggles of the European powers that dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Postcolonial theory is sheltered under larger postcolonial studies. It incorporates strategies that serve as links for understanding imperialism, a nation's strategy for extending its powers, and the various brands of colonialism (Kennedy, 2000). Loomba (2015) defines colonialism as, "the conquest and control of other peoples' land and goods" (p. 21) but offers additional context to account for modern colonialism, including the ways profits always flowed back into the so-called mother country. Such context, when analyzed through a postcolonial lens, should nudge researchers who are interested in studying individuals from countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries to think critically about the motives of those who are in power. Indeed, there are connections between power, knowledge, and the profits that are produced within a colonial context.

Critical researchers can use a postcolonial lens to investigate the ways colonized behaviors and thinking exist today and the ways they might be disrupted. Kwok (2005) provides a prerequisite to achieving this when she states, "Postcolonial intellectuals need to be vigilant about the deep-seated layers of colonialist patterns of thinking in the archaeological excavation of their mind" (p. 3). A qualitative research study that seeks to amplify the voices of Caribbean students from countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries can disrupt institutional structures that perpetuate inequality. This opens the door for the paving of more socially just pathways for Caribbean students. Villaverde's (2008) definition of postcolonial theory provides a useful lens to build on

Kwok's (2005) claim because it creates a space to explore the ways in which the past and present plays out. Villaverde (2008) states:

Postcolonial studies examine the relationship between the British and French (as European superpowers) and the countries they colonized, as well as subsequent development of Third World nations and indigenous knowledge. This is not to imply that colonialism is a practice of the past; on the contrary, postcolonialism allows us to understand the lasting impact of living under colonial rule. Postcolonialism has contributed greatly to the ways we theorize about power and resistance, which has been extremely useful in shifting national conceptions of authority and privilege. (pp. 81-82)

Understanding key stakeholders of power and the ways others are impacted is a hallmark of postcolonial studies. Villaverde (2008) allows her readers to see this by triggering thought on the ways power and privilege of the past continue to exist today. Memmi (2013) does something similar for scholars and students by dividing the minds of the oppressor and the oppressed through a basis of acceptance and refusal. He states, "The colonizer who accepts his role tries in vain to adjust his life to his ideology. The colonizer who refuses, tries in vain to adjust his ideology to his life, thereby unifying and justifying his conduct" (p. 89). This gets at the complex emotional effects of colonialism that has a lasting impact on individuals. Unfortunately, hidden versions of colonialism exist today and a few Caribbean student participants from this study shared, from their perspectives, the ways colonialism has impacted their country, family dynamics, and their own personal experiences.

Postcolonial theorist Edward Said has made significant contributions to the postcolonial discourse that closely connects to this study. Specifically, two of those

connections are his work on *Orientalism* (and the links to resistance) and his focus on the function of criticism in the contemporary world. The book *Orientalism*, first published in 1978, is a hallmark of Edward Said's work as it relates to postcolonial theory. It illuminates the problematic nature of colonialism and the ways in which it has continued today. Childs and Williams (1997) state:

One of the more influential aspects of Orientalism has been Said's examination of the way in which the West not only constructs the Orient, but constructs it precisely as its Other, the repository of all of those characteristics deemed non-Western (and therefore negative)...Orientalism as a body of knowledge may have been intended principally for consumption in and by the West, it did (and does) nevertheless serve to tell non-Western cultures the "truth" about themselves in a way which is congenial to the West. (pp. 100-101)

In summation, the West has strategically used its power to create a label stamped with inferiority for others around the world. Said's work on *Orientalism* rebukes this label and questions who and what should be accepted and considered normal.

Another critical aspect of Said's work is his desire to spark resistance strategies among researchers who are interested in utilizing a postcolonial framework (Childs & Williams, 1997; Kennedy, 2000). Said used the Palestinian struggle, the ongoing conflict between Israelis and Palestinians that is centered on human rights, as an example of postcolonial resistance. Childs and Williams (1997) reference Said's thinking on the Palestinian struggle and state, "Among the sources of its power are the fact that it is a cultural resistance by an entire people...namely people's rejection of the attempt to confine them- whether physically, or by means of strategies such as representation" (p. 109). The importance of resistance must be underscored within a postcolonial framework

and connects to Said's yearning to disrupt contemporary theory because of its lack of connection to the problems and constraints of the world (Childs & Williams, 1997). The fact that Western ideas and thinking continue to dominate the world is an indication that Said's work is just as relevant today as it was when first introduced. A critical study that uses postcolonial theory while acknowledging the core contributions of Edward Said lays the foundation to convey a deep understanding of the experiences of those from countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries.

The application of a postcolonial lens in the analysis of Caribbean students' voices underscored the importance and complexity of their experiences. While the body of research on international students in the United States is growing, large gaps still exist among the experiences of various subgroups of students who come from different regions of the world, including the Caribbean. For example, there are only a few scholars who have utilized qualitative research to investigate the dynamics of race within the context of Caribbean students' experiences at U.S. institutions of higher education. Such an approach is important because Morrison and Bryan (2014) claim that Caribbean students often experience poor educational outcomes at U.S. institutions, which are attributed to diverse issues such as racial discrimination (see also Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). Addressing these unique needs is important today because college and university campuses are experiencing an era of intense racial awareness that have led to tension and unrest (Breed, 2015). Caribbean students are exposed to these tensions and must navigate them at a time when they are acclimating to a new country and institution away from

their family and friends. Postcolonial theory provides a unique lens to examine these experiences.

### **Research Design**

This was an interview-based critical qualitative study. In this study, I gained a deep and broad understanding of the experiences of Caribbean student participants at institutions of higher education in the United States through 18 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and one focus group with three participants. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) state, "Qualitative research seeks to probe deeply into the research setting to obtain in-depth understandings about the way things are, why they are that way, and how the participants in the context perceive them" (p. 12). Given this, I paid attention to the factors that contribute to the nuances of the participants' experiences, including the institution they attend, island of birth, and race. As stated earlier in this chapter, the design of this qualitative study began in the spring of 2017 when I conducted a pilot study with six international students. The results of the study were humbling because of the appreciation showed by the participants, and it confirmed my desire to further explore the experiences of students who come from the Caribbean. This current study took a more focused approach than the initial pilot study by using individual interviews and a focus group to examine the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students and the ways in which race impacts their experiences.

### **Recruitment Strategy**

I chose Caribbean students through a purposive and snowball sampling process. Gay et al. (2009) describe purposive sampling as the process of selecting a sample that is

representative of a given population. I began the purposive sampling by identifying institutions of higher education with a large body of Caribbean students. Because of the large population at each institution, I found Caribbean student associations through which I could reach out to many students. In order to build rapport and trust with the students, I contacted presidents of these student associations and explained my research topic. I was invited to join various social media communities for Caribbean student associations at a few institutions. I accepted these invitations and slowly began to build a network of Caribbean students. I posted copies of my recruitment flier on these social media sites with hopes of receiving interest from Caribbean students.

Given my experience building rapport with participants in the pilot study, I also used snowballing as a recruitment strategy. Snowball sampling is the ability to identify additional participants for a study through the selection of a few participants who fit the criteria (Gay et al., 2009). Shortly after my dissertation proposal defense, I reconnected with a student from the island of Trinidad whom I interviewed in the pilot study, informing her that I planned to continue my research by focusing on the experiences of Caribbean students. She quickly referred me to other Caribbean students who might be interested in participating in the study. My involvement with global and international education at the state and national levels was also an asset in the recruitment process. I informed directors of international student offices and global education units at various institutions of higher education about my research, and I asked their assistance in recruiting Caribbean students for this study. The above strategies yielded positive results and I soon had a large pool of 58 prospective Caribbean students for my study.

## **Participant Selection Criteria**

For the purposes of this study, including participant selection, I defined the Caribbean (or West Indies) as the region southeast of the Gulf of Mexico and the North American mainland, and north of South and Central America (New World Encyclopedia, 2018). The specific criteria for selection and participation in this study was individuals who, (a) self-identified as being from the Caribbean region as defined by the study, (b) currently attend or recently graduated from an institution of higher education in the United States, (c) have not been living in the United States for more than eight years, and (d) currently enrolled in at least nine academic credits or successfully completed the degree requirements from their college. I selected these specific criteria because I believe Caribbean students who meet all of them would be able to provide a deep perspective on their experiences at their undergraduate institution that would answer the research questions. As I compiled the names of Caribbean students who were interested in participating in the study, I used a rubric with the aforementioned criteria as a screening tool. This was important because 58 Caribbean students from four institutions of higher education on the east coast of the United States were interested in the study and some of them did not meet the criteria. The rubric was a successful screening mechanism that ensured participants met the criteria, which served as a prerequisite for me to have an introductory conversation with them. These introductory conversations allowed me to build rapport and learn why they were interested in the study. Most of the Caribbean students that I spoke with were excited to learn that someone had an interest in the experiences of Caribbean students at U.S. universities. Some Caribbean students

expressed interest in the study after I made my initial selection and did not get to participate in the study.

Caribbean students from English, Dutch, Spanish, and French speaking islands were interested in participating in the study. I intentionally selected students from the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) and the Lesser Antilles (Trinidad, Tobago, Antigua, St. Kitts, and St. Maarten) because I believe it was important for me to capture participants from at least two regions in the Caribbean and at least two languages. This was an integral part of my selection decision. I also included Caribbean students from the Bahamas, which is in the Caribbean but not considered part of the Antilles. While I was concerned about meeting these criteria when I initially proposed this study, I quickly realized when I started to recruit participants that my challenge actually would be narrowing down participants.

The following two tables reveal the 18 Caribbean student participants and a description of the four institutions of higher education in the United States they attended.

Table 3.1 Participants' Overview

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Island of Birth</b>	<b>Immigration Status</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b># of Years Living in the U.S.</b>
<b>Jane</b>	Sophomore	Jamaica	F-1	Black	PSU	7 years
<b>Luiz</b>	Junior	Puerto Rico	U.S. Citizen	Hispanic	PSU	4 years
<b>Kerry</b>	Junior	Tobago	F-1	Black	T&R college	3 years
<b>Nadia</b>	Graduated	Dominican Republic	U.S. citizen	Mixed	PSU	7 years
<b>Ramona</b>	First year	Haiti	U.S. Citizen	Black	PSU	7 years
<b>Kelly</b>	Sophomore	Puerto Rico	U.S. Citizen	Hispanic	PSU	4 years
<b>Kim</b>	Senior	Antigua	F-1	Black	PSU	7 years
<b>Rachel</b>	Graduated	Bahamas	OPT (Optional Practical Training)	Black	PSU	4 years
<b>Consetta</b>	Senior	Cuba	U.S. Citizen	Hispanic	PSU	4 years
<b>Damian</b>	Sophomore	Bahamas	F-1	Black	Jamestown	2 years
<b>Richard</b>	Junior	Bahamas	F-1	Black	Jamestown	3 years
<b>Kennedy</b>	First Year	Bahamas	F-1	Black	Jamestown	1 year
<b>Sheena</b>	Senior	Haiti	TPS (Temporary Protected Status)	Black	PSU	8 years
<b>Jenny</b>	Junior	Cuba	U.S. Citizen	Hispanic	PSU	4 years
<b>Doria</b>	Senior	St. Maarten	Permanent Resident	Black	PSU	5 years
<b>Mimi</b>	Graduated	Jamaica	F-1	Black	Abraham	6 years
<b>Rena</b>	Junior	Haiti	U.S. Citizen	Mixed	PSU	4 years
<b>Wendy</b>	Junior	Dominica Republic	F-1	Hispanic	PSU	3 years

Table 3.2 Institutional Descriptions

Institution name	<i>Description</i>
Jamestown University	A small predominantly White private non-profit college in the southeast United States that enrolls many international students. The institution currently enrolls approximately 870 undergraduate students and 1000 postgraduate students. The college admits 54% of its students and provide financial assistance through scholarships for international students. The town where this university is located, which has a population of 41,000, served as a major center for Confederate activity during the Civil War.
<i>Thomas and Rolls College:</i>	A small predominantly White private, coeducational, for-profit college in the northeast United States that have campuses in 3 additional states. The institution currently enrolls approximately 13,803 undergraduate students and does not have any graduate programs. The school began as an institute but now offers two-year (Associate degree) and four-year (Bachelor’s degree) at select campuses.
<i>Pimenta State University</i>	A large Hispanic-serving public research university located in the southeast United States. The institution currently enrolls approximately 48,166 undergraduate students and 8,700 graduate students. It is one of the largest university in the United States by enrollment. This university is located in one of the most diverse cities in the United States that has a population of approximately 6,000,000 and it enrolls a large number of Caribbean students.
<i>Abraham College</i>	A small predominantly White private institution in the northeast United States. The institution enrolls approximately 2,034 undergraduate students and 789 postgraduate students. This institution started

	as a small liberal arts college for women but experienced expansion in the early 2000s. The school is located in a populous city in the northeast United States.
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### **Data Collection Procedures**

I collected data via in-person and video semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and a focus group. My initial intent was to interview at least 20 Caribbean students because I thought this number of students would provide enough data to comprehensively answer the research questions. However, I accomplished this by interviewing 18 Caribbean student participants. All Caribbean students who participated in the one-on-one interview were invited to participate in a focus group. I believed the focus group would provide a collective analysis that I could not glean from a one-on-one interview. However, not all 18 students chose to attend the focus group. I conducted one focus group with three students. The focus group was conducted in-person at Jamestown University. These data collection methods allowed me to gather perspectives from Caribbean student participants that answered the research questions.

As I approached my interviews and focus group, I was constantly reminded of Glesne's (2016) advice to qualitative researchers, "Think of interviewing as the process of getting words to fly...as a researcher, you want your pitches- your questions- to stimulate verbal flights from respondents who know what you want to know" (p. 96). Glesne's description of the interview process resonated with me, in that I wanted to holistically understand various aspects of the Caribbean student participants' experiences.

To support this sort of flight experiences in the words of the participants, I carefully crafted my interview questions to be inviting and intriguing; this meant that I wanted to ask questions that the participants would be inspired to answer. I knew, from the scholarship, that the key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions (Merriam, 1991, p. 7). Hence, I gathered feedback and guidance regarding interviewing, including question formation, from those who have extensive experience interviewing respondents for large-scale research projects.

I found that the introductory conversations I had with participants allowed me to heed Glesne's (2016) advice about the importance of building rapport with participants so that they are more comfortable during the interview process. In the framing of this study, I was initially concerned about the complexities of topics such as race relations, which was a critical piece of the interview. Specifically, my concern was whether the participants would be willing to share experiences about a topic such as race which is very contentious in the U.S. today. I was also attuned and sensitive to current on-going, national, political debates about immigration and student visas while I was recruiting Caribbean students. Having had the opportunity to build rapport with many of the participants through introductory dialogue, I found it easier to have authentic dialogue around these concerns because there was some level of comfort when we got to the one-on-one interview.

### **Introduction to Participants**

To build rapport with each Caribbean student participant, I asked them about their Caribbean background, journey to the United States, and other details that were salient to

them as students who were from the Caribbean. In this section I use the information gathered to provide brief biographies of each participant. Because this study is focused on the academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences of Caribbean students, I reveal information about each participant that could provide perspectives on these topics. The following are biographies of the 18 Caribbean student participants of this study.

### **Damian**

Damian is a Caribbean student on a F-1 visa from the island of Bahamas. Damian is currently a sophomore majoring in Religious Studies at Jamestown University. He has been living in the United States for two years, speaks English only, and identifies as Black. Damian was home-schooled with 6 to 8 other students for his K-12 education in the Bahamas and always had dreams of attending flight school so he could become a pilot. He described his parents in the Bahamas as being structured, strict, and religious. Academics was a top priority in his household because of his parents, who believed that higher education was instrumental to a successful life. Damian learned about college in the United States from a friend of his family who was an alumnus of the institution he is currently attending. Damian and his family inquired about the college from others and attended a college fair hosted in the Bahamas by the admissions office of Jamestown University. They were enticed by the \$20,000 scholarship package the institution offered to international students. When Damian learned that he was eligible for the scholarship and that Jamestown University was reputable, he decided to pursue his undergraduate studies at that institution. He has no family in the state where he is attending college.

**Ramona**

Ramona is a Caribbean student from the island of Haiti who is a U.S. Citizen. She is a first-year student at Pimenta State University where she plans to major in Architecture. Ramona has been living in the United States for 7 years, speaks both English and French, and identifies as Black. She attended a portion of middle school and all of high school in the United States. She and her family were displaced because of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, a catastrophic magnitude 7.0 earthquake that caused major damage throughout Haiti. The Haitian earthquake was devastating for the island of Haiti and its citizens, and it ultimately triggered her family move to the United States. Ramona believed it was positive for her family in the sense that it gave them an opportunity to improve their lives. Her family played an influential role in her decision to attend this large institution in the southeast United States. She has a close relationship with her mother who was an alumna of that institution and spent her career working there. Both Ramona and her family appreciated the institution's affordability, racial diversity, and proximity to Haiti. She often referenced the institution's ability to connect her to her Caribbean upbringing because of the large Haitian population there.

**Kerry**

Kerry is a Caribbean student on a F-1 visa from the island of Tobago. She is a currently a junior scholarship athlete at Thomas and Rolls College. Kerry plans to major in Criminal Justice. She has been living in the United States for three years, speaks English only and identifies as Black. She described her upbringing on the island of Tobago as one that was centered on her love for soccer (or football as it is called in the

Caribbean). Kerry aspired to pursue higher education studies in the United States, but believed it was not possible because of the high financial cost. Her parents pushed for her to attend the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine because of its closer proximity to Tobago, affordability, and the family connections she had there. However, Kerry was able to pursue her passion for sports and attend an institution of higher education in the United States because of a partial athletic scholarship, granted by the government of Trinidad and Tobago, and financial support from a family sponsor. She maintains close communication with her family and friends in Tobago and visits home at least once a year.

### **Kim**

Kim is a college senior from the island of Antigua who attends Pimenta State University. She plans to major in Human Resources and International Business. Kim has been living in the United States for seven years, speaks English only and identifies as Black. Kim's parents, who had non-immigrant U.S. visas, travelled from Antigua to give birth to her in the United States. Kim's parents immediately returned to Antigua after they received the appropriate U.S. citizenship documents for her. Kim graduated high school at the age of 16 and successfully completed a two-year college in Antigua (Antigua State College) before deciding to pursue her studies in the United States. She claimed it was always in her parents' long-term plan for her to eventually live and study in the United States given the fact that she is a U.S. citizen. Kim's close relationship with friends and family, as well as her own familiarity with the city and institution (she frequently visited as a young kid) influenced her decision to attend Pimenta State

University. While her parents considered higher education in Canada, she was adamant on pursuing her studies in the United States.

### **Rena**

Rena is a junior from the island of Haiti who is a U.S. citizen. She attends Pimenta State University. She plans to major in Fine Arts with a specialization in Graphic Design. Rena attended an American system school in Haiti for K-12 which she credited for exposing her to the United States education system. She has numerous family members who attended institution of higher education in the United States, and now live there. Rena has been living in the United States for five years, is fluent in both French and English, and identifies as biracial. She often highlighted the complexities of her identity as a biracial Haitian woman (her mother is White and father is Black) growing up in a predominantly Black country. Her fluency in English and her parent's constant reminder to take advantage of the educational benefits associated with her U.S. citizenship fueled her interest to pursue her studies in the United States. Rena grew up believing that the economic conditions in Haiti were not conducive to her overall success, which served as another source of motivation for her to pursue her studies in the United States. She maintains a close relationship with her parents and is passionate about her Haitian roots. Rena has family in the city where she is attending college and sees it as a second home.

### **Mimi**

Mimi recently graduated from Abraham College where she majored in Speech Language Pathology. Mimi has been living in the United States for four years, speaks

English only and identifies as Black. Mimi is currently on a F-1 visa in graduate school at a large public University in the southeast United States and reflected on her undergraduate experience as a participant of this study. While attending high school in Jamaica, Mimi began to inquire about institutions of higher education in the United States. She started visiting a college counseling organization in Jamaica that provided advice to high school students on U.S. college applications. The counseling organization was nationally known around Jamaica and the Director had connections to institutions of higher education all over the world. Mimi was academically driven and spent significant time researching academic majors before deciding to apply for college. She ultimately chose that institution because the tuition was lower in comparison to other schools she explored. Furthermore, the institution offered a generous scholarship package in addition to the low tuition.

### **Doria**

Doria is a senior from the island of St. Maarten who attends Pimenta State University where is majoring in Business. Doria's grandmother, a U.S. citizen who is currently living in the United States, filed the appropriate immigration documents that allowed Doria and her mother to become permanent residents of the United States. She has been living in the United States for five years, speaks English only and identifies as Black. Doria was familiar with higher education in the United States because most of her family lived here and a few of them attended college. Her mother, a high school teacher for 27 years, initiated the move to the United States with the goal of having Doria pursue her education. Doria and her mother believed that while primary and secondary schools

in St. Maarten were academically strong, there was not a lot of higher education options. In fact, she claimed that there was only one institution of higher education on the entire island. As a resident of Dutch St. Maarten, she would have gotten an opportunity to attend a higher education institution in Holland. However, her parents would not have been able to afford it. Hence, a move to the United States where scholarship opportunities were more readily available was inevitable. Doria believed that having family in the United States further influenced her move.

### **Richard**

Richard is a junior on a F-1 visa from the Bahamas attending Jamestown University. He plans to major in Aviation. Richard has been living in the United States for three years, speaks English only, and identifies as Black. Richard recalled during his high school days that there were numerous college representatives coming to his high school to recruit students for college in the United States. While he had no intentions to attend an institution of higher education in the United States, he became curious after talking to college recruiters from Jamestown University. He decided to attend Jamestown University because of its reputable Aviation program, the small size of the college, and financial incentives that were offered by the institution. He discussed the importance of a college degree for employability within his desired career, which was to become a Pilot. He had also seen family members who had benefited from higher education. Richard acknowledged that he has family in the United States who have been instrumental in assisting with his transition to college.

**Luiz**

Luiz is a junior who was born on the island of Puerto Rico and raised in the Dominican Republic. He plans to major in Finance and pursue a career in the financial industry. Luiz currently attends Pimenta State University. He has been living in the United States for four years, speaks both English and Spanish, and identifies as Hispanic. His upbringing involved frequent flights between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic because of close family connections in both islands. As a young boy, his dream was to join the U.S. military, so he attended a military college in the northeast United States. He did not take a liking to the city in the northeast United States where he attended military college and decided to move to a more diverse environment to pursue his studies in finance. While he appreciated his time in a traditional a northern city, he acknowledged it lacked a multicultural presence. Luiz often reminisced about the food in Puerto Rico that he had enjoyed so much as a kid. He values the community of being in an environment with a high number of diverse students and community members.

**Jenny**

Jenny is junior from the island of Cuba who is a U.S. citizen. She currently attends Pimenta State University where she plans to major in Physical Therapy. Jenny has been living in the United States for four years, speaks both Spanish and English, and identifies as Hispanic. She never felt connected to Cuba because of her belief that the citizens are not valued there, citing limited resources and opportunities for people to advance themselves. She aspired to live in Puerto Rico as a young child and even moved there for a short time. However, Jenny and her family quickly realized that the United

States was a better fit because there were more educational opportunities. Jenny decided to attend Pimenta State University because of the large Cuban population there and the tuition was low in comparison to other schools she explored at the time. Her higher education journey started at the near-by community college. She then transferred to Pimenta State University through a pipeline program. Jenny valued her experience at the community college and believed that her time there helped her to be successful at a four-year institution.

### **Wendy**

Wendy is a junior on a F-1 visa from the Dominican Republic who attends Pimenta State University. She plans to major in Fine Arts with a concentration in graphic design and a minor in social media and e-marketing analysis. Wendy has been living in the United States for three years, speaks both Spanish and English, and identifies as Hispanic. Wendy attended a bilingual school in the Dominican Republic where there were classes taught in both English and Spanish. She was exposed to college options in the United States at that bilingual school. Wendy spent summers visiting her family in the United States when she was a young child in the Dominican Republic. When Wendy became serious in majoring in graphic design, she knew it would be advantageous to move to the United States since there were no opportunities to major in it if she stayed in the Dominican Republic. Her family also pushed her in that direction and ultimately felt more comfortable sending her school there because of family connections.

**Sheena**

Sheena is a senior from the island of Haiti who attends Pimenta State University. She is currently on TPS (temporary protected status) and plans to major in Political Science with a minor in International Relations. Sheena has been living in the United States for eight years, speaks both French and English and identifies as Black. Sheena shared that she did not have plans to move to the United States for higher education. However, with the 2010 Haitian earthquake, a catastrophic magnitude 7.0 earthquake that caused major damage throughout Haiti, her family had to explore other options. Sheena underscored the wide-spread devastation that was caused by the earthquake and how life was different for most people on the island. She shared that her school was destroyed as a result of the Haitian earthquake. Sheena believed familiarity with the United States and the value of a degree earned here were the factors that influenced her decision to pursue higher education studies. Sheena mentioned the strict educational environment that exists in the Caribbean and how that prepared her for higher education in the United States. Sheena has been a social justice advocate for immigrants, participating in pro DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and TPS marches in Washington, DC.

**Kelly**

Kelly is a sophomore from the island of Puerto Rico who attends Pimenta State University. She is a first-year student who plans to major in Fine Arts. Kelly has been living in the United States for four years, speaks both Spanish and English, and identifies as Hispanic. Kelly moved to the United States for high school when her mother got transferred for work. She expressed throughout the interview the great appreciation she

had for her mother who has exposed her to several different opportunities. Kelly's mother introduced her to art at a young age and she became very interested in pursuing studies in that field. Kelly decided to attend college in the United States because of a generous financial package that was offered to her through a state-funded program and because the institution has a reputable Fine Arts academic program. Since arriving in the United States, Kelly has maintained a close connection to Puerto Rico by visiting at least once a year. However, she acknowledged that Hurricane Maria, a catastrophic category 5 storm that hit Puerto Rico in 2017, will hinder her ability to travel there in the near future because of the negative impact it had on to her family.

### **Jane**

Jane is a sophomore on a F-1 visa from the island of Jamaica who attends Pimenta State University. She plans to major in Psychology. Jane has been living in the United States for seven years, speaks English only, and identifies as Black. Jane travelled to the United States with her mother who left Jamaica in pursuit of a different career. Prior to her mother's move to the United States, she frequently moved around in Jamaica because of the nature of her mother's work. Jane attended high school in the United States and believed that assisted her transition to college life in the United States. Jane visited the United States a few times with her mother prior to the permanent move. She did not aspire to attend college in the United States, but it became obvious that she needed to explore higher education options when she started living here. She values the strict educational structure and environment that Jamaica offered and believed that was instrumental to a successful academic transition.

**Nadia**

Nadia is from the Dominican Republic and is an alumna of Pimenta State University. Nadia majored in special education and currently aspires to do research on children who have been negatively impacted by autism. She was brought to the United States by her parents and has been living here for seven years. Nadia speaks English and Spanish and identifies as Hispanic. Before the move, she shared that her family was divided over the decision to move here because of negative views and perceptions associated with the United States. Nadia claimed that her family was concerned about her being exposed to drugs in the United States. Still, they decided to move to the United States. Nadia's parents instilled in her the importance of staying disciplined, but she did not always heed their advice. She mentioned that she was smart and was usually at the top of her class but recalled being distracted upon arrival to the United States. She got back on track academically because of positive mentoring from professors who cared about her. She remains very connected to her family and friends back in the Dominican Republic.

**Rachel**

Rachel is from the island of Bahamas and currently holds an Engineering degree from Pimenta State University. Rachel has been living in the United States for four years, speaks English only, and identifies as Black. She is on OPT (Optional Practical Training) status and seeking employment in the United States. Rachel studied Mathematics at the College of the Bahamas and explored switching her major to Civil Engineering. She decided to research institutions of higher education in the United States because there

were no Civil Engineering programs available in the Bahamas. Rachel considered Bahamas' proximity to the United States in her decision. She had never visited the United States prior to her arrival for higher education studies. Rachel's parents were huge proponents of education, opting to send her to private school in the Bahamas. She shared that attending a private school in the Bahamas was not the norm and it placed additional pressures on her to succeed academically. Sports was a big part of Rachel's upbringing in the Bahamas. She played basketball, tennis, swimming, and ran track while in high school.

### **Consetta**

Consetta is a senior from the island of Cuba who is a U.S. citizen. She attends Pimenta State University where she plans to major in Sociology. Consetta has been living in the United States for four years, speaks both Spanish and English, and identifies as Hispanic. Consetta travelled to the United States with her parents, who always had plans to live in the U.S. to give her and her siblings an opportunity to explore higher education. She explained that her mother was lucky to have won U.S. visas through the lottery system that opened the door for them to legally travel to the United States. Her family instilled in her as a young child that coming to the United States would provide better opportunities in terms of education, employment, economic stability, and healthcare. Consetta shared about the political instability in Cuba and that studying in Cuba was never a real option for her. Consetta criticized the dictatorship model of governance that currently exists in Cuba and that staying there would hinder her intellectual freedom. She claimed the lack of freedom encouraged her family to flee the country.

## **Kennedy**

Kennedy is a first-year student from the island of Bahamas who is currently on an F-1 visa. He attends Jamestown University where he plans to major in Aviation. Kennedy has been living in the United States for under a year, speaks English only, and identifies as Black. Kennedy described his upbringing in the Bahamas as being intrigued with pilots and knowing from a very young age that he wanted to pursue it as a career when he grew up. He mentioned on a few occasions that his parents were extremely strict and pushed him to succeed academically. Kennedy learned about the institution that he is currently attending when college recruiters attended his high school and explained the opportunities that exist for him to pursue his studies in the United States. He was immediately drawn to the scholarships that were offered to international students and took advantage of that opportunity when he was admitted to the institution. Kennedy travelled to the United States alone and does not have any family members in the country.

### **Data Transcription and Analysis**

After conducting 18 individual interviews and one focus group, I personally transcribed three interviews and then learned about a transcription software called Temi from a faculty member in my department. I was initially reluctant to use Temi because I was unsure if it would work well due to the participants' accent. Still, I decided to experiment with it for one transcription, and was pleasantly surprised at the level of accuracy in transcribing the interview with a Caribbean student who had a strong accent. While I needed to make edits to the transcripts, I found it to be relatively accurate. Hence, I used Temi to transcribe the remainder of my interviews. I listened to the audio files a

few times before making any edits because I wanted to ensure that I was accurately capturing the participants' stories and perspectives. After listening to the interviews and making edits to the transcripts, I started the data analysis process.

Glesne (2016) states, "Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so you can figure out what you have learned and make sense of what you have experienced" (p. 183). Given the goals of this study, I used thematic analysis to assist with the interpretation of the data. In discussing thematic analysis, Glesne (2016) recommends segregating the data into categories by codes or labels and then analyzing the coded data in a variety of ways (p. 184). Saldaña (2009) defines a code as, "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-catching, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data (p. 3). As a starting point, I coded the transcripts for each interview. Before segregating the data, I read the edited transcription of each interview countless times. I reflected on the data and followed-up via phone or email with a few of the participants to get clarification on narratives that were unclear. Given my commitment to accurately reflect participants' stories, these follow-up conversations were important, and the participants appreciated my desire to precisely portray their words and stories.

Conducting semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and one focus group on the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students and the ways race impacted their experiences allowed me to organize the data under these broad categories with the goal of answering the research questions. I marked separate passages under these headings, searched for commonly used words, and grouped them into broad categories. I

then studied these categories for thematic connections within and among them while keeping the research questions in mind. Using this approach, I was able to identify themes that provided numerous perspectives on the academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences of the Caribbean student participants.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

I have given much thought to the trustworthiness of my study since I started to use a researcher's log. Glesne (2016) instructs that, "the trustworthiness of your study should receive attention as you plan your research and develop a proposal. Trustworthiness is about alertness to the quality and rigor of a study, about what sorts of criteria can be used to assess how well the research was carried out" (p. 53). I employed member-checking, triangulation, and peer review to develop and maintain the trustworthiness of my study. I especially found member-checking to be a beneficial strategy in eliminating my assumptions as I reviewed the data. Birt, Scott, Cavers, Christine, & Walter (2016) claim, "The potential for researcher bias might be reduced by actively involving the research participant in checking and confirming the results" (p. 1802). As I analyzed the data, I frequently called or texted participants to verify information from the transcripts. Also, I developed good relationships with a few of the participants and invited them to review the major themes derived from my study. To gain various perspectives during this review, I reached out to students from the different Caribbean regions.

For this study I used two forms of data collection- individual interviews and a focus group. I believe both methods allowed me to have different standpoints around the

themes that were derived from this study. While some of the core themes appeared at both the individual interviews and focus group, the context at which it was discussed differed. In many ways, the focus group confirmed some of the core themes that were derived from the individual interviews. Lastly, a few peers from my PhD program provided external reflections, perspective, and input on my work. Their thoughtful feedback allowed me to make changes to various segments of this work.

### **Benefits to Participants**

Because the experiences of Caribbean students at U.S. institutions is an underexplored research topic in education, one of the primary benefits to participants was the opportunity to share about their experiences as Caribbean students. Some participants spent the first few minutes of their individual interviews thanking me for doing this work because they felt their voices had not been heard by others. Hence, this study created a space for current and former students who had been impacted by oppressive structures to share their stories which, according to a few of the participants, was a “refreshing” experience. This feeling aligned with the critical social justice aims of this study. Another benefit to participants, or future Caribbean students, was the potential for this study to guide further research and practice on Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States and other countries around the world. For example, one participant claimed that he became motivated after his interview with me and started an association to support Caribbean students on his campus. As faculty, staff, and administrators read this work, it may both challenge and inspire them to be mindful of the unique needs of Caribbean students.

## **Presentation of Findings**

This study is thorough in the sense that it was not conducted at one institution, did not specifically look at students from one Caribbean island, and it used both one-on-one interviews and a focus group to gather data from participants. There was not a geographic focus to the recruitment efforts in this study. Still, it is worth noting that all Caribbean student participants attended institutions of higher education on the East coast of the United States, and there were occasions when I emphasized regional and institutional influence when presenting the data. To align with the critical social justice aims of this study and my desire to amplify the voices of Caribbean students, I selected qualitative research methods that would bring attention to participants' exact words. It is for this reason that I also include direct portions of my conversations with participants that contribute to the theme and provide perspective on the research question being addressed.

The Caribbean student participants' stories shared in Chapters IV, V, and VI provide a broad representation of their academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences. I analyze these stories using a postcolonial lens and pay attention to how these stories both contribute to and deconstruct perspectives on race, culture, immigration, and theories of social justice. Because there were numerous themes that emerged as I coded and analyzed the data, I designate a chapter to each research question. Chapter IV reveals the racial experiences of the participants, Chapter V discusses the differences and commonalities within and among their experiences, and Chapter VI explores their academic, cultural, and social experiences. In these chapters, I alter identifiable information, including names, in order to maintain the participants' anonymity. In the final chapter, I offer my

overall analysis of this study, including the postcolonial connections to the Caribbean student participants' stories, the conclusions that addressed the research questions, implications for research and practice, and what it has meant for me to do this work as someone who was born and raised in the Caribbean.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter outlined the research paradigm, theoretical framework, research design, site selection, participant selection, recruitment strategy, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, the benefits of this research to current participants, and the presentation of findings. Also, I presented detailed biographies of the 18 Caribbean students who participated in this study. As I prepare to reveal the findings of this study, I am reminded of a question asked by Carolyn Shields (2012) in her work on critical advocacy research, "Has our research done anything to level the playing field, to overcome disparity, or to promote a more mutually beneficial society?" (p. 12). The results of this study could provide institutions of higher education with resources needed to support Caribbean students. The themes and stories that emerged through my analysis of the stories of Caribbean student participants will represent the base of the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER IV

### NAVIGATING RACE AS A CARIBBEAN STUDENT

One of the primary goals of this study was to explore the ways race impacted the experiences of the Caribbean student participants. Hence, each participant was directly asked about their experiences with race during the individual interviews and focus group. The picture that emerges from participants' stories involves multiple dichotomies which underpins the nuances of race in their experiences. Caribbean student participants' experiences with race varied based on their racial identification. Furthermore, the reactions and emotions around race displayed by the participants of this study validate what Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) claim, "Talking about race is an intellectually and politically challenging endeavor that is complicated by the shortage of spaces to engage in conversations about it" (p. 12). The passion and anger the participants showed when sharing about their racial experiences were apparent and I found that some participants felt like they had a lack of space to discuss race at their schools. In this chapter, I start by discussing the complexities of race in the United States. Then, I reveal the racial groups of the participants and illuminate their experiences with race as they navigate their undergraduate experience. This chapter answers the first research question of this study:

Question 1: In what ways does race affect the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

## **Race and Caribbean Student Participants**

Race is a socio-historical concept that is given meaning by the specific social relations and historical context in which it is embedded (Omi & Winant, 2015). It is a critically important social factor that often impacts the experiences of students of color at institutions of higher education in the United States. Throughout my 12-year professional career in higher education, a significant portion of my work has been striving to create welcoming environments for students of color with hopes they would feel supported. Oftentimes, it has been a challenge to achieve this because the racial landscape in the United States is complex. Specifically, today, we see the simultaneous rise of both white nationalism and movements geared at eliminating racial inequality. The U.S. is racially coded and xenophobic sentiments have fueled policies aimed at excluding and creating a hostile environment for immigrants of color throughout its history. In discussing race as a master category of oppression and resistance in the United States, Omi and Winant (2015) state, “Race has served as a template for both difference and inequality” (p. 246). This means there are social advantages and disparities that affect people because of how they identify racially.

The notion of learning about the racial experiences of the Caribbean student participants is particularly important because they all pursued their undergraduate studies in the United States, a country built upon a historical legacy of oppression. In this study, the Caribbean student participants were all students of color who self-identified with three racial groups: Black, Hispanic, and Mixed-race. Although Hispanic is not one of the official five racial categories (American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African

American; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; and White) for census purposes and the U.S. government recognizes it as an ethnicity rather than a race (Bettez, 2012, p. 28), there are scholars who maintain that Hispanic/Latino as a race makes just as much sense as the current racial groups (Lombard & Sen, 2014, p. 1). Given that race is, in and of itself, a social construction (Bettez, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2015), restricting a discussion of race to the categories only identified by systems of power seems unproductive to a research project informed by postcolonial theory. With that in mind, coupled with the fact that some participants may think differently about what race means since they were not born in the United States, I did not question the Hispanic Caribbean student participants' choice to talk about being Hispanic when they were asked questions about their race.

Initially, I was uncomfortable using the word Hispanic because of its perceived negative connotation among critical scholars, preferring instead to use Latino/Latina or identify the Caribbean student participants from Spanish-speaking islands by nationality. However, the participants used "Hispanic" to refer to themselves. Furthermore, Austin and Johnson (2012) shared that while Latino is gaining acceptance, a presidential tracking poll reported that, "a significant majority of Hispanics still prefer the term Hispanic" (para. 3). Hence, I use the term Hispanic throughout this chapter when referring to most participants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic who self-identified as Hispanic.

Of the 18 participants of this study, 11 participants identified as Black, five participants identified as Hispanic, and two participants identified as Mixed-race. Table

4.1 provides a visual of this, showing the participants' names, race, institution, and island of birth.

Table 4.1 Caribbean Student Participants' Racial Identification

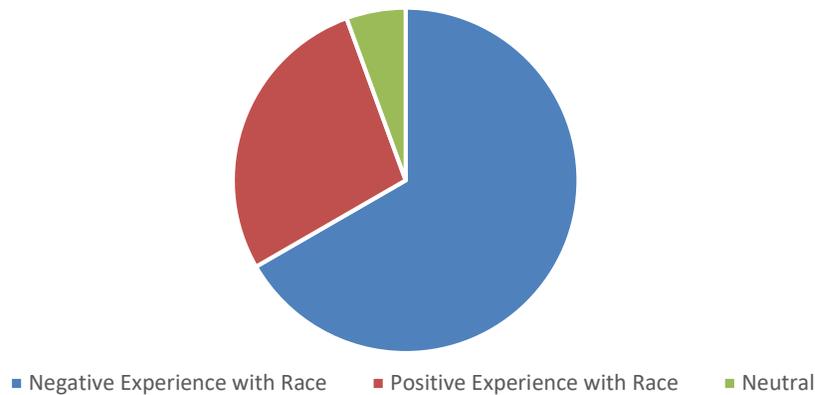
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Island of Birth</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Institution</b>
<b>Jane</b>	Jamaica	Black	PSU
<b>Luiz</b>	Puerto Rico	Hispanic	PSU
<b>Kerry</b>	Tobago	Black	T&R college
<b>Nadia</b>	Dominican Republic	Mixed	PSU
<b>Ramona</b>	Haiti	Black	PSU
<b>Kelly</b>	Puerto Rico	Hispanic	PSU
<b>Kim</b>	Antigua	Black	PSU
<b>Rachel</b>	Bahamas	Black	PSU
<b>Consetta</b>	Cuba	Hispanic	PSU
<b>Damian</b>	Bahamas	Black	Jamestown
<b>Richard</b>	Bahamas	Black	Jamestown
<b>Kennedy</b>	Bahamas	Black	Jamestown
<b>Sheena</b>	Haiti	Black	PSU
<b>Jenny</b>	Cuba	Hispanic	PSU
<b>Doria</b>	St. Maarten	Black	PSU
<b>Mimi</b>	Jamaica	Black	Abraham
<b>Rena</b>	Haiti	Mixed	PSU
<b>Wendy</b>	Dominica Republic	Hispanic	PSU

By asking the 18 Caribbean student participants who identify as Black, Hispanic, and Mixed-race about the ways race impacted their experiences during their

undergraduate studies, this study addresses Saenz and Douglas’s (2015) call for immigration researchers to “more fully incorporate race perspectives into the study of immigrants” (p. 166). Of the Caribbean student participants, 12 participants claimed race had a negative impact on their experiences, five participants claimed race had little to no impact on their experiences, and one participant did not elaborate regarding the ways race impacted their experiences. The participants who reported negative experiences with race were Black and Mixed-raced, while the participants who reported race had no impact on their experiences or remained neutral were Hispanic.

Figure 4.1 Breakdown of Caribbean Student Participants’ Experiences with Race

#### Caribbean Student Participants and Race



As a Black Caribbean man who has experienced racism as both a student and professional staff member, I approached this segment of the study knowing that researchers Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) found Afro-Caribbean international students struggle with aligning themselves with the Black race or calling themselves Black (p. 596). However, I had little to no knowledge about Hispanic and Mixed-race Caribbean

students because the literature about their experiences at institutions of higher education is almost nonexistent. Most participants of this study claimed that race had a negative impact on their experiences, but the extent and context of these negative experiences varied based on how the participants identified racially. This highlights the nuances of race in the experiences of the Caribbean student participants at their respective institution. Because there were similarities in the narratives based on each racial group, I report and organize this chapter based on how the participants identified racially. The subsections that follow provide further perspectives on the connections between Caribbean student participants' racial categories and their experiences with race.

### **Black Caribbean Student Participants' Experiences with Race: Racism and Discrimination**

The 11 Caribbean student participants from Jamaica, Tobago, Haiti, Antigua, Bahamas, and St. Maarten all identified as Black. Throughout my conversations on race with these participants, they alluded to how proud they were of their Black identity and how it was a salient part of their experiences as they pursued their undergraduate studies. They all referred to themselves as either "Black" or "Afro-Caribbean" as they made associations to their racial identity. There was at least one Black Caribbean student participant from each of the four institutions of higher education represented in this study. Manyika's (2001) qualitative study on negotiating identities of African students in British and American Universities provides a detailed analysis on the discrimination faced by Black international students that is unique to college campuses in the United States. Since then, there have only been a few studies that examine the experiences of Black Caribbean

students (see Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014) at institutions of higher education in the United States. Participants provided first-hand accounts of the ways race impacted their experiences.

The narratives around race shared by the Black Caribbean student participants of this study were centered on the racism and discrimination they experienced as they pursued their undergraduate studies. Doria, who was born and raised in St. Maarten and attends Pimenta State University, shared the ways in which she felt discriminated against when I inquired about the ways race had impacted her experiences. She states:

I am pro-black to the utmost level. However, it's sad because I feel like a lot of times there are teachers who have been discriminatory to me because of that. It's so bad to the point where I won't upload my picture on Canvas, our online learning Portal. I would just opt out of the picture because I don't want anyone to judge me based on my color. I had a situation where I was in an online class and a teacher asked me to put my picture on our project or else I won't get a grade. When I uploaded my picture in that situation, I felt like I was graded less. I went the extra step of taking my work to another professor in that same business field and I asked the professor to revise it. I asked what grade I would get if I turned in that same assignment for your course. The professor said I would have given you a 92. And this other professor only gave me a 78. It was 15 pages of work.

This negatively impacted her experience, and she did not feel comfortable displaying her picture online because of the belief that it could potentially harm her. Furthermore, Doria's trust with a university personnel was broken. This is significant given the ways Caribbean student participants of this study perceived their professors. In Chapter VI, I share additional stories of how participants had both negative and positive experiences with their professors and the consequent impact on their academic experiences. Doria recalled tangible examples of times when she was discriminated against which further

validate the negative experience with had with the above professor. Specifically, Doria shared:

I tend to go to the library a lot to get my work done. I normally use headphones and listen to music while in the library, but I didn't have my headphone with me that day. The library usually lends out headphones, but you need your ID and I had lost my wallet the weekend prior. There was another White girl who was sitting next to me and she didn't have headphones either. I knew her from my dorm. Ironically, she wanted to checkout headphones and didn't have her ID card as well. We joked about it but then she mentioned to me that she was going downstairs to get headphones. I was like, okay, tell me how that works out. So she went downstairs to the girl at the front desk and then she told the girl that she didn't have her ID card. She got the headphones, so I decided to try the same thing. I explained to the girl at the front desk that I don't have my ID because I lost my wallet the weekend prior. The girl told me that I would not get the headphones. She said that it was the policy. I told her this is not going down like this because you just gave headphones to this other White girl who did not have an ID. I am going to speak to your manager. The girl at the front desk was also White. I spoke to the manager and I told her that the policy should apply to everyone, not just for one. I put in a report in and got the headphones in the end.

Whereas in the situation above, there was no way for Doria to prove what she experienced was racism, as is often the case, in this situation there was no doubt that she was the target of racism. Having personally experienced similar acts of racism as an undergraduate student, I nodded my head slowly to signal to Doria that I was deeply interested in what she was saying. She mentioned that, "the entire process of going to the manager took approximately two hours" and that she was mentally drained by the time she got the headphones. Doria was frustrated by the entire process and was no longer motivated to study after the incident and talking to the manager. Time taken away from studying, together with the emotional toll, were significant for Caribbean student participants. Hence, these acts of racism often transcend into other aspects of their

experiences. Nevertheless, it is striking how Doria advocated for herself and was resilient. I saw her resilience when she stressed the importance of being, “strong and advocating” for what one believe is right, regardless of the time and energies it take. Yet it is important to recognize that it does take a significant amount of time and energy; Doria explained that she was too tired to continue with her studies after the confrontation.

When Black Caribbean student participants experienced discrimination and racism during their undergraduate experience, they were often surprised because they never had such experiences growing up in the Caribbean. All Black Caribbean student participants of this study hailed from Caribbean islands where most of the population were Black. Kim, who is from Antigua that has a population of over 91% Black (World Population, 2019), mentioned the following:

I felt the racial tension here in America when I arrived. It was different because being Black back home in Antigua is not a problem. I never noticed that I was Black in Antigua because mostly everyone is Black. And everyone gets along. It doesn't matter if you are a White or Black. It didn't feel like we were different. But up here in America, I noticed that I was different. People are prejudice towards you, and they treat you like you are not the same. It is almost like Black is a bad thing.

Those growing up in the U.S. swim in this racism in ways where it is hard to name, yet the juxtaposition of Kim's experience makes clearer how there is a sentiment that Black is bad. Other participants echoed various versions of this as they compared their experiences of being Black in the Caribbean to being Black here in the United States. For example, Jane, who is from Jamaica and attends Pimenta State University, discussed how she had “been around Black people all my life” until she arrived in the United States for

school. 90.9 percent of Jamaicans are Black (Oxford African American Studies, 2019).

These narratives were magnified by the Black Caribbean student participants who attended predominantly White institutions. For example, Mimi, who is also from Jamaica and recently graduated from Abraham College, had the following to say:

Because Abraham College was so White, there were a lot of racial tension. Back in Jamaica we mainly dealt with colorism, but at Abraham College you had colorism and racism. I had never experienced racism or any racial tension while I was in Jamaica. I would have never thought that me eating fried chicken would perpetuate a stereotype. I like fried chicken and that is just not something I had to think about in Jamaica. I find that a lot of the students at Abraham College didn't have a World knowledge because they were self-contained. I had students ask if I live in a hut on the beach. I often thought that I can't believe someone just asked me that. You learn as an international student that you are an ambassador for your country, so you brush it off and you educate those who have no knowledge of your country.

Mimi was the only Black Caribbean student participant who acknowledged some form of discrimination (colorism) in the Caribbean and she did not elaborate on how colorism manifests in Jamaica after I inquired. Instead, she focused on the shock of being stereotyped for eating a food that she enjoys. Her comments regarding students at Abraham College asking whether she lived in, "huts on the beach" is telling of the perceptions that some students may have when they meet Caribbean students.

Unfortunately, there were not many students who could relate to her Caribbean upbringing at Abraham College and it illuminates the need for more cross-cultural training among students.

Kerry, who is from Tobago and attends Thomas and Rolls college on an athletic scholarship, mentioned the same type of shock that Mimi shared. Thomas and Rolls is a

predominantly White institution in the northeast United States. One of the first aspects of her experiences with race that Kerry underscored was the lack of diversity at Thomas and Rolls college. She explained how diverse the island of Tobago is in comparison to what she is experiencing at Thomas and Rolls College. After being at Thomas and Rolls college for just a few weeks, Kerry claimed, “I started seeing and noticing stuff and soon realized that it was racism.” She elaborated by sharing:

I don't want to talk bad about my school but my overall experiences with race here have been very bad. I have been trying to get a job on-campus and they won't help me. You know, so I went back again to the administrators and asked if they could help and they said no we could not help you, because I am an international student. I honestly believe it's because I was Black. I was able to sign up to be a tutor later in the year. I did my own research, and I saw that international students can work but only in the school.

Through my own personal experience and knowledge of employment for international students, I acknowledged, during the interview, that international students are permitted to be employed on their respective campus and a university administrator advising otherwise is disturbing. Complicating Kerry's experience with race was the fact that she is a student athlete (soccer player). She believed that more attention was given to her during the athletic season since sports was important to the students, faculty and administrators at her school. She revealed, “You know when soccer season is in session, they cheer me on. However, after the season is over, they treat us like we can wait.” Given my experience of being an undergraduate scholarship student-athlete, I shared with Kerry my own experience of navigating these feelings.

It is common to see Black students overrepresented in college sports. Furthermore, various studies have revealed that Black athletes are not as successful as their White counterparts, in achieving higher GPAs and graduation rates (see Harper, Williams, & Blackman, 2013; Hawkins, 2010). Hawkins (2010) shares,

In order to negotiate strategies to navigate successfully in this current culture of intercollegiate athletics, it is imperative that young Black athletes understand that the playing field and arenas at these institutions have replaced the cotton and tobacco fields that their ancestors toiled in from sun up to sun down. (p. 14)

Of course, this is not to imply that institutions of higher education are not concerned with Black athletes' success. What it does mean is that the Black body can be used for gain by Whites in a similar way that it did during slavery. While some may argue that she gets a scholarship and is compensated so it should not be equated to slavery, I still question the million-dollar salaries of some college coaches. Although many of these coaches do an excellent job managing their teams and building a good reputation for their respective University through athletic success, they receive many benefits because of their role as coaches. Hence, Kerry's story provides an angle at which one could argue in favor of what Hawkins (2010) revealed.

In a focus group discussion with Damian, Richard, and Kennedy at Jamestown University, there were pointed discussions around the ways race had impacted their experiences. While Jamestown University is a diverse institution, all the participants felt like their Black Caribbean identity was a challenge for them. Jamestown University is located in a town that served as a major center for Confederate activity during the Civil War. Many of the participants shared their discomfort whenever they left the confines of

the university campus. After the focus group, we all got into my car and drove to a local restaurant. As we navigated through the town, the participants shared various aspects of the town that made them feel uncomfortable, including numerous confederate flags on display. I, too, was uncomfortable. Although I did not inquire about how the flag impacted them as Caribbean students, it appears the students were aware of the flag before coming to the United States and how it is a notorious symbol of U.S. enslavement and racism. This knowledge alone created a feeling of discomfort whenever they saw the flag.

Black Caribbean student participants of this study came to college campuses in the U.S. from predominantly Black Caribbean islands where most had never experienced any form of discrimination and racism. Participants acknowledged not noticing or experiencing their Blackness until they arrived in the United States to pursue their undergraduate studies. Still, they were able to associate their experience of racism with being Black. Although Thomas (2012) states, “Black Caribbean immigration to the United States is rooted in strong historical, cultural, and economic linkages between the two regions” (p. 18), there are many differences between the United States and the Caribbean. The stories and narratives of the Black Caribbean participants point out the most obvious – the racial difference between the Caribbean and the United States – and the consequences of these racial differences. Hence, Black Caribbean student participants experienced shock as they had to grapple with experiences of discrimination and racism that they were not used to. Complicating this is the fact there have been limited studies that thoroughly examine the experiences of Black Caribbean students at institutions of

higher education in the United States. I believe the work of Constantine et al. (2005), which focuses on Black-African international students, may be relevant here. They shared the role that race and racial discrimination can play in the experiences of Black-African international students at PWIs. They interviewed 12 African international students at a PWI and found that participants generally indicated prejudice or discriminatory treatment by others, including being called names and racial slurs by White Americans (Constantine et al., 2005, p. 60). This study and the Constantine et al. (2015) study demonstrate that there is the experience of racism for Black students who come from other countries, which raises questions around support and advocacy for these students.

#### **Mixed-race Caribbean Student Participants Experiences: Inter-Caribbean Racial Tension**

Two participants of this study identified as Mixed-race. They are Rena, who is from Haiti and attends Pimenta State University and Nadia, who is from the Dominican Republic and graduated from Pimenta State University. As previously stated, Pimenta State University is a Hispanic-serving institution in the southeast United States. Rena had one parent who is Black and the other who is Hispanic while Nadia had one parent who is Black and the other who was White. The stories and narratives they shared surrounding their experiences with race indicate that their Mixed-race identity was salient to them. All narratives around race shared by Rena and Nadia were negative, which transferred into gloomy experiences as they pursued their undergraduate studies. This was the case even with Pimenta State University being a Hispanic-serving institution that has targeted

programs and services aimed at students of Hispanic background. The following conversation with Rena emphasizes how being Mixed-race negatively impacted her experiences.

**Hazael:** Thank you for such thoughtful responses thus far. I want to talk about your experience with race at Pimenta State University. In what ways do you believe your race impacted your experience as a Caribbean student?

**Rena:** Well I am considered to be a White Haitian and I really don't know why and what exactly that means.

**Hazael:** Really? Can you tell me more about that, where did that term come from and how does hearing that term impact your experience?

**Rena:** It came from Haitians- from the diasporas. Diasporas is the term for Haitians that have been living in the United States and they refer to people like me in that manner. Honestly, they really don't know a lot about Haiti and they look at people like me and say that you know you are really not from Haiti. You are White. You have soft hair. I would speak Haitian creole to them and they would be like there is no way that you are from Haiti. So for me, racial wise this was one of the biggest challenges. Not being accepted by my own people at Pimenta State University because I am Mixed-race.

Visually, Rena is not white passing but much lighter in skin tone than the other two Caribbean student participants who were from Haiti. Being referred to as White or a White Haitian by others from her country had negatively impacted Rena's experiences. Her frustrations and emotions were apparent; while talking she nodded her head in a negative manner. At times, she would be sarcastic about the references made about her hair, but there was an underlying seriousness around the ways such comments negatively impacted her experiences. According to Rena, "it made me feel isolated." This was of significance because Rena decided to enroll at Pimenta State University partly due to the large number of Haitian students. At the time of her enrollment, she believed this

dynamic would make her experience as a Haitian more seamless. However, she claimed during our discussions about race, that what was once excitement has turned into bitterness as she constantly tries to prove to others from Haiti that she is in fact Haitian.

Similar frustrations were shared by Nadia as she made me aware of how her Mixed-race identity negatively impacted her experience. Her experiences as a Black-White Mixed-race Caribbean student spanned from being harassed by others who did not accept her because of that identity to dealing with inappropriate comments directed towards her by her peers. Nadia did not feel accepted by others from the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean islands. She associated this inability to connect with her peers with her Mixed-race identity. Nadia shared the following when asked about her experiences with race and how it impacted her experiences at Pimenta State University:

It's weird because people don't see me for who I am because I'm Mixed-race. They don't know if I'm White or I'm Black or I'm Hispanic. They see a picture of my family in my dorm room and they think I want to be white or I want to be Black. The truth is I just want to be me. My mom is Black and my dad was white. My mom married a Black man. I never grew up being and feeling different until I came to America. America taught me that I wasn't who I thought I was.

There was a lot of frustration as her desire to be authentic as a Mixed-race Caribbean student conflicted with what others thought about her. Given my limited knowledge and experience with students from the Caribbean who hold this identity, I listened attentively to her as she shared about her experience. A core observation in Nadia's narrative was her constant attempt to link her negative experiences to the United States. She did not have trouble fitting in with Dominicans in the Dominican Republic but she had trouble

fitting in with them in the United States. There could be nuanced factors at play within her narrative, including the ways in which Dominicans living and studying at Pimenta State University may have been influenced since arriving in the United States. Nadia claimed she was not aware of her Mixed-race identity when she resided in the Dominican Republic and commented on how the context of living in the United States was inherently challenging as a Mixed-race Caribbean student.

A consistent and common narrative between Nadia and Rena was the challenges they experienced with other Caribbean students at Pimenta State University. Specifically, some Caribbean students' unwillingness to appreciate and accept the fact that they are Mixed-race. Nadia had the following to say when she started to underscore some of the racial challenges that she experienced with others from the Caribbean while living in the United States and attending Pimenta State University:

Racism can happen within the Caribbean. Growing up in the Dominican Republic, we were racists against the Haitians because so many of them immigrated to our country. I remember the first person that was racist against me in America was a Cuban student at Pimenta State University. She didn't speak any Spanish and she told me; "this is America and you need to speak English." I was upset and responded by telling her if you are Cuban then I'm ashamed of you because your ancestors spoke Spanish and you don't know how to.

Nadia's comments speak to how different Caribbean students are depending upon where they are from and their racial/ethnic background. It also illuminates the racial tension that could occur among Caribbean students that is not explicitly tied to her Mixed-race identity. Still, there was an impact as she examined her experiences with race at Pimenta State University. Nadia claimed that she expected support and acceptance from others

from the Caribbean but that did not materialize at Pimenta State University. Instead, she was faced with experiences where those she assumed would serve as part of her support system did not. Nadia's story evoked personal experiences for me because, as an undergraduate Caribbean student, I often gravitated towards peers who were from Caribbean islands that are predominantly Black.

This notion of racial tension among those from the Caribbean was also mentioned by Rena. While Rena did not share specific examples of how these tensions among Caribbeans negatively impacted her experiences, she had an underlying belief that there is racial tension within and among those from the Caribbean. As she delved deeper discussing her encounters with race at Pimenta State University, she had the following to share:

I would say Jamaicans and Haitians we get along very well but that is not the case with those from the Dominican Republic and Cuba. It is much harder for them to get along. I believe that the Cubans are always trying to make a competition out of everything. I am not sure what they are competing for. For some reason it is easier for Jamaicans and Haitians to get along than Haitians and Cubans for example.

From Rena's comments, it was clear that there are negative feelings towards Caribbean students from Cuba. Perhaps Jamaicans and Haitians get along, in part, because their cultures are more similar, and they tend to be Black. On the other hand, Cubans may be dealing with internalized racism which could lead to ill feelings towards their peers from other Caribbean islands. While a detailed overview of how Cubans arrive in the United States is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that over one million Cubans immigrated to the United States from 1959 to 1995 in an effort to rebuild their lives after

the traumatic experience of the Cuban revolution, during which many of them recreated and reinterpreted Cuban culture (Cuban Exiles in America, 2005). I noticed a great deal of emotions through Rena's voice as she recalled about the aforementioned experience. At times, there was an underlying tone of disgust about racial dynamics and tension that occurs within the Caribbean. While there was not a clear connection between these experiences and her Mixed-race identity, her comments and reactions gave me much to ponder, particularly considering that both Cuba and the Dominican Republic are close together, speak the same language, and have some of the same cultural celebrations. As I reflect on this interview, I am thinking – how might this be a possible effect of colonizers' efforts to pit residents of a country or multiple island against each other in order to maintain their power? This has been a strategy of white supremacy for a long time.

A detailed search for the experiences of Mixed-race Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States resulted in almost nonexistent scholarship. Of course, there was research on Mixed-race individuals, but nothing specifically focused on Caribbean students who are Mixed-race. In a recent *Diverse Education* article, Nicole Barone wrote about the nuances that comes with being Mixed-race. She states, "Mixed-race students aren't going away, and like many other shifts that impact higher education, faculty and administrators will need to respond accordingly" (Barone, 2018, para. 15). While the scholarship around the experiences of Mixed-raced students have increased steadily over the past 10 years, there is much room for scholarship that address the experiences of Mixed-race Caribbean students in the United

States. A 2018 study around the experiences of Mixed-race white and black Caribbean children in England could be applicable to Mixed-race Caribbean students in the United States. In this study, Lewis and Demie (2018) suggest mixed white/black Caribbean students continue to be the lowest performing mixed group in the country because of experiences of marginalization, low expectations that teachers held about them, the lack of knowledge of how to support them at school and they suggest these issues are exacerbated by their friendship group (p. 1). Some of these complexities were supported in this study. Still, more research is needed to more accurately depict the experiences of Mixed-race Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States.

### **Hispanic Caribbean Student Participants Experiences with Race: Culture and Advocacy**

There were five participants from the Caribbean islands of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic who identified as Hispanic in this study. These Caribbean student participants were all bilingual (English and Spanish) and attended Pimenta State University, a Hispanic serving institution. Two of the Hispanic Caribbean student participants, Wendy and Kelly, were white-passing. The Hispanic Caribbean student participants had a unique experience with their ethnicity as they navigated their undergraduate experience. Unlike the participants who identified as Black and Mixed-raced in this study, their experiences were mostly positive. Also, they were more likely to remain neutral and link their experiences with race to their cultural upbringing. Luiz, who

is from Puerto Rico captured the aforementioned points when I asked him to share about the ways race has impacted his experience. He shared the following:

I don't feel like race has affected me at all because I'm Puerto Rican. I also don't see race in a negative way. It was the culture that really impacted me a lot and I learned a lot from it. Puerto Rico is very different than the United States. So I see race more from a cultural sense.

Luiz had an interesting undergraduate experience because he started at a small school in the northeast United States before transferring to Pimenta State University. He was direct and clear in his belief that race is linked to culture and how it had no impact on his experience. Luiz's claims aligns with the growing body of work over the past ten years that has reframed the study of ethnicity, race, and nationalism in broader and more integrated terms, generating a new field of study that construes ethnicity, race, and nationhood as a single integrated family (Brukaber, 2009, p. 22). Luiz mentioned in the interview concerns around classism he had experienced while in Puerto Rico and he believed that similar dynamics exist in the United States. As he continued to share about his experiences with race, he mentioned what he perceived to be problematic trends and customs around race happening in the United States and how it was a culture shock to him. He shared:

Like it's just crazy how there is such racial tensions in America, like cops killing other people and how Black people criticize White people. It was such a huge shock. There is a big separation between races in America. Like you have the Hispanics here and then Asians and then White and then Black...It was a huge culture shock for me.

Although Luiz associated his experiences with race more with culture, I found his acknowledgement of the racial divide and tensions in the United States to be noteworthy. Though not prevalent on his campus, he has a heightened awareness around racial tensions that is happening across the United States.

Kelly, who was also born in Puerto Rico and white-passing, shared that race, “had no impact on her experience.” When I asked Kelly about the ways race had impacted her experience as an undergraduate student at Pimenta State University, she shared that she is white-passing and speaks very good English which has made it easy for her. She states, “I’d say that I’m lucky enough that I’m white-passing and my English passes as American, so a lot of people just assume that I’m a White American.” This was a frequent point of reference for Kelly as she commented very little about her encounters with race as a Hispanic woman. Although she claims that she had an overall positive experience with race, Kelly remains mindful of those who are not so fortunate and constantly has negative encounters because of their race. She shared numerous times during the interview that race is a big concern in the United States while acknowledging her privilege of being white-passing and being able to speak English fluently. She recalled the following:

I have a friend of mine who moved here when she was 10 and she looks more Hispanic. Whenever I’m walking with her, I noticed people will prompt us in Spanish and she is not always treated nice. When I’m walking around with my mom who is white-passing and looks like me people will prompt us in English, and we are treated a lot better. Just last week a few of my friends and I got pulled over for speeding. I was a little scared because I had two of my friends in the back of the car. One is visible Hispanic and the other one is Black. The cop came off more aggressive when he looked at the back of the car. He looked over at the back

and asked- are there any illegal substances in the car? We said off course not. I'm just dragging them all home. Situations like this make me think about my privilege and how lucky I am. I don't feel as scared as people who look Hispanic and Black.

Exchanges such as what Kelly shared above have not only reminded her of her privilege but continuously reminds her of why she needs to be mindful of the experiences of others. She recalled how much her friends were frazzled by the above interactions. Kelly claimed that her younger brother is “tan” and is more visually Hispanic, and that his experiences more mirrors some of what her friend encountered in the car. She says, “when you see that it in your own family, it really hits close to home.” This could help explain why Kelly continued to be aware of her privilege. Being a white-passing Hispanic, she acknowledged that her experiences with discrimination will never be the same as those with darker skin. Still, I could sense an internal struggle as Kelly grappled with having some of the privileges of a group that she does not identify with.

Wendy, who was born and raised in the Dominican Republic and white-passing, also confirmed that race has little impact on her experiences. Wendy attended a bilingual school in the Dominican Republic where there were classes taught in both English and Spanish and had spent summers visiting her family in the United States when she was a young child in the Dominican Republic. She had the following to share when I asked her about her experiences with race as an undergraduate student at Pimenta State University:

As a person of color on campus I can honestly say I haven't experienced any problems with race. I feel like I have more responsibility as a person of color that if I see something, I have to say something. At times, I see a lot of people get mistreated just because they're different color, different religion. They just look

different than you. I don't think it's right. And I feel like I have the responsibility to help out other people if needed. I try to represent my culture and I try not to make anyone bring me down. Pimenta State University is a diverse campus and there are a lot of students with Hispanic backgrounds just like me which has helped a lot.

While Wendy did not discuss the fact that she is white-passing, that privilege can be seen in her story. She echoed what I heard from Kelly and Luiz – that race had little impact on her experiences and there is a strong connection between race and culture. I believe they perceived that race had little impact because they did not have negative experiences. Yet, their skin color and cultural positioning, which relates to racial identification, did have an impact, an impact of being privileged. There was also an underlining tone of advocacy. As Wendy shared about her experiences with race, she often recalled, without sharing details, times she had witnessed others not being treated fairly because of their race. According to Wendy, this has happened in, “residential facilities and classes.” Whenever Wendy experienced or heard about these situations, she often felt hurt and thought about ways that she could combat this in her daily life.

A detailed search for scholarly research on the experiences of Hispanic Caribbean students at undergraduate institutions in the United States reveals no results. In this study, the stories of the participants revealed the minimum impact race had on their undergraduate experience and how they linked race with culture. As previously stated, all five Hispanic Caribbean student participants of this study attended Pimenta State University and only one of the five Hispanic Caribbean student participants (Consetta)

shared a negative example around the ways race impacted their experiences. Consetta revealed the following:

I think Pimenta State University tries to stand for the city and encourage the diversity that there is throughout the city within its campus, but just because Pimenta State University is so encouraging and so welcoming of every sort of race and every sort of background, that doesn't mean that everyone in the city is. One of the things that really surprised me is the way my Spanish language exposed me to racism. I have an example that I would like to share on how this played out for me. I was working as a cashier at Publix and I was speaking Spanish to a client that initially spoke Spanish to me. You know, when someone speaks Spanish to me, I try to speak Spanish back to make the checkout process more pleasant for them. In that case, an American individual behind that client was saying how it's America and I should be speaking English. I had to put my foot down and say, well, I wasn't speaking to you sir and before I'm American, I'm Cuban. And I just remember getting very emotional because of that. And even though my response was a little unprofessional, I felt like he deserved it and I had to call my manager and everything. The situation got escalated because of this one man's biased opinion against others. So those things still happen even in a city like Lorez [pseudonym] and your language can result to a bad experience.

So while this study reveals an overall positive experience for Hispanic Caribbean students at Pimenta State University, there are instances that can lead to negative experiences. More importantly, her example reveals how one aspect of a student's identity can impact others. In her specific example, we see the power of nationality and language emerged as she was confronted with by someone who was clearly racist. I found it impactful when Consetta forcefully claimed, "Before I'm American, I'm Cuban." This gets at the close association the Hispanic student participants made to their culture as they shared about their experiences with race. Given the limited research involving Hispanic Caribbean students' experiences with race and the fact that all the participants who identified as Hispanic in this study attended a Hispanic serving

institution, more studies and inquiries are needed to provide a holistic view of their experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Bettez (2012) states, “Because race is real in its material consequences, and we have yet to escape racial designations, using race-based terms is necessary to unpack operations of power” (p. 28). For that reason, and considering the fact that the Caribbean student participants self-identified with three racial groups (Black, Mixed-race, and Hispanic), I chose to segment the data based on their experiences with these races. Further justifying this approach is the consistency that existed in the participants’ stories based how they identify racially. The participants who were Black and Mixed-race overwhelmingly reported negative experiences with race while the participants who were Hispanic mainly reported race had no impact on their experiences or remained neutral. The institution the participants attended and their island of birth were nuanced factors in the racial experiences of the participants.

The Black Caribbean student participants reported experiences of racism and discrimination as they recalled about their experiences with race. Their stories aligned with what have been shared in the literature on Black Caribbean students (see Constantine et al., 2005; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Manyika, 2001; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Mixed-race Caribbean student participants also shared negative encounters they had because of race, but it was mainly focused on the struggles they had being accepted by other students from the Caribbean. Hispanic Caribbean student participants were more likely to link their experiences with race to their cultural upbringing. This was expected

given all the participants who identified as Hispanic attended Pimenta State University. While this segment of the study provides valuable information regarding Caribbean student participants experiences with race, further research is needed to provide a more holistic perspective from Black, Mixed-race, and Hispanic Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States.

## CHAPTER V

### DIFFERENCES AND COMMONALITIES IN CARIBBEAN STUDENT PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES

This study explored Caribbean students' academic, cultural, and social experiences, as well as the ways race impacted their experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States. To align with the critical social justice aims of the study, I analyzed the experiences of 18 Caribbean students who participated in the study through a postcolonial theoretical lens. While there is an abundance of literature on international students, studies that specifically examine the experiences of Caribbean students are scarce. Furthermore, today's immigration climate, fueled by aggressive anti-immigration policies and the anger they provoke, creates new and complex challenges for faculty, staff, and administrators at U.S. educational institutions who work with all international students. In this chapter, I analyze the differences and commonalities that emerged from the interview data provided by the Caribbean student participants. Through the analysis process, I identified four subthemes that serve to underscore the differences and commonalities within and among their stories. These subthemes are: (a) immigration status, (b) language, (c) need for financial assistance, and (d) family as priority. This chapter answers the following research question:

Question 2: What are the differences and commonalities in the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

## **Differences in Caribbean Student Participant's Experiences**

The stories of Caribbean student participants from nine unique Caribbean islands demonstrate the diversity within that region. Thematically, in addition to differences based on racial positioning already discussed in the previous chapter, there were two main differences in the experiences of Caribbean student participants: immigration status and language. Narratives around immigration and language highlight how the histories and cultures of the Caribbean islands influenced participants' experiences and it portrayed how their upbringing plays a noteworthy role in successfully navigating a new environment. In the next two sections, I provide additional context regarding how immigration status and language differed within and among the experiences of the Caribbean student participants of this study.

### **Immigration Status**

Immigration status significantly impacted the experiences of the Caribbean students who participated in this study. For the purposes of reporting this theme, I placed all Caribbean student participants into two broad statuses - immigrant and nonimmigrant (see figure 2). Then, I demonstrate, through participants' stories, how their experiences differ based on whether they were immigrants or nonimmigrants. According to the National Conference of State Legislators (2015), nonimmigrant are, "those who are allowed to enter the United States for a specific purpose and for a limited period of time, such as tourist, students, business visitors, diplomats, and specialty occupations such as high tech workers or seasonal agricultural workers" whereas immigrants refers to individuals who are permitted to reside permanently in the United States (para. 3 & 4). In

this study, Caribbean student participants who were in the United States as nonimmigrants were more impacted by their immigration status, and thus reported their immigration status as a salient aspect of their experiences. This was a sharp contrast to the immigrant Caribbean student participants who rarely acknowledged their immigration status.

Table 5.1 Immigration Status of Caribbean Student Participants

<b>Nonimmigrant status (F-1, TPS, and OPT)</b>	<b>Immigrant status (U.S. citizens and permanent residents)</b>
Jane (F-1)	Luiz (U.S. citizen)
Kerry (F-1)	Nadia (U.S. citizen)
Wendy (F-1)	Ramona (U.S. citizen)
Rachel (OPT)	Kelly (U.S. citizen)
Damian (F-1)	Consetta (U.S. citizen)
Richard (F-1)	Jenny (U.S. citizen)
Kennedy (F-1)	Doria (permanent resident)
Sheena (TPS)	Rena (U.S. citizen)
Mimi (F-1)	Kim (U.S. citizen)

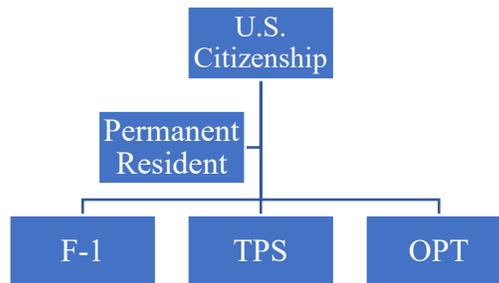
There were five unique immigration statuses among the 18 Caribbean students who participated in the study. As Table 5.1 shows, nine Caribbean student participants were immigrants (U.S. citizens or permanent residents) and nine were nonimmigrants (F-1 visa, Optional Practical Training [OPT], or Temporary Protected Status [TPS]). An F-1

visa allows students from other countries to pursue education in the United States. OPT is the time period during which undergraduate and graduate students with FI status who have completed or have been pursuing their degrees are allowed by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to work for one year on a student's visa (USCIS, 2019). I know from my personal experience of being on OPT status that the goal is for students to get practical training that complements their education. Not all OPT applications are approved and current U.S. immigration policies have changed to increase scrutiny and look-backs to deny immigration benefits for minor infractions, such as failure to report a change of address within 10 days of moving. TPS is granted by the United States Department of Homeland Security to citizens of other countries that are experiencing an ongoing armed conflict or an environment disaster or epidemic in their home country (USCIS, 2019).

### **Nonimmigrant Caribbean Student Participants' Connectedness to Immigration Status**

Nonimmigrant Caribbean students who participated in this study were greatly impacted by their immigration status. Specifically, almost all the nonimmigrant participants spoke about negative experiences related to their status and had a challenging transition to the United States. Regardless of the type of higher education institution, these negative experiences continued as they pursued their undergraduate studies. Furthermore, their narratives reveal a perceived hierarchy of immigration status (Figure 5.1). In this subsection, I use the stories of Kerry, Sheena, and Rachel to exemplify this.

Figure 5.1 Perceived Hierarchy of Immigration Status Based on Caribbean Students' Experiences



Kerry, who is from Tobago and came to the United States with F-1 status, shared about an experience at the U.S. embassy in Trinidad. Her encounter provides a tangible example of why immigration status can be so salient for nonimmigrant Caribbean students. Kerry shared the following experience when asked about her transition to the United States:

My experience at the United States embassy in Trinidad was not good. The people at the embassy mentioned that the date on my I-20 is different than the expected arrival in the United States so they were like it is either two things you need to do: keep it this way and they may turn you back at the point of entry in America or re-submit it for review. I became very scared. I was like this is risky, and it would take a really long time especially given I have already missed portion of school. So, I was like I am going with the first option. I am going to try. I am going on faith. I was thinking that I need an excuse letter regarding why I would be late because that may be the only way that I will be able to get into the United States. When I arrived at the immigration checkpoint, I was terrified, and I had to explain to the immigration officer why I was late. He let me through, and I am here today.

I listened to Kerry as she shared her story and reiterated versions of it repeatedly. The tone of her voice became more forceful as her volume increased and she started to use more hand gestures the longer she discussed that encounter. Kerry mentioned

throughout the interview that this experience had a lasting impact on her. She said, “I could have lost everything if I was turned back at the immigration check point upon arrival to the United States.” This terrifying occasion continued to impact her as she recalled being constantly worried about returning to the United States after visiting Tobago for the winter and summer holidays. Kerry stated that while it often brought her joy to know that she was on her way to see her family during these holidays, it also brought the same level of fear and uncertainty whenever she thought of the slight possibility of not regaining entry to the United States. I shared with Kerry the time that I was brought back to a special booth for questioning when returning to the U.S from the winter holidays my senior year in college because the immigration officer wanted to know about my plans post-graduation as a way to relate to what she had experienced. While we attempted to infuse humor in both of our experiences, we realize the seriousness of these situations if things were to go wrong at the immigration checkpoint.

Nonimmigrant Caribbean students on TPS and OPT also shared stories about how their immigration status were closely connected to their undergraduate experiences. For example, Sheena, who was on TPS status, expressed how she became an advocate for students on DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and TPS status. She took trips to Washington, DC as part of on-campus advocacy groups she had joined because of how it closely related to her experience. Sheena’s on-campus involvement, whether academically or socially, was centered on immigration advocacy. She wanted to help others by being a supportive figure for all who had been negatively impacted by their immigration status. She conveyed:

As a TPS student, I must say the immigration policies in the United States is so harsh. Because of the constant debates happening today I feel so uncertain about me being here. Students like me who actually migrate from one country to another are only trying to live a better life. We're doing it so that we could have something for ourselves when we grow up because mom and dad did not have a lot. So having officials and politicians tell us that TPS will be ending soon is just heartbreaking. What am I supposed to do? I cannot focus in school when I hear this news. And, as a student, you're only doing what's best for yourself. You're going to school, you're working hard and then you start to question yourself. Am I doing something wrong [Long pause]? Am I not supposed to do these things [Long pause]? We are doing the right thing and still being persecuted. Everyone comes here in the United States for the American dream and that's achieving your goal, becoming a successful person. That's what most Caribbean students or immigrant students are doing. So it's really harsh to see that we are being persecuted. And you know, I follow a lot of immigration and immigration policies. When we went to DC, I notice there are senators telling you what they will vote for. But then again, their supporters are not people who support DACA or TPS. It's amazing to hear people share their stories. When I was protesting in Washington, DC, I remember there was a lady, she's a teacher and she finished a master's degree and she had three daughters who are U.S. citizens. You know, she's in the process of being deported. When she shared her story it really broke my heart because she's teaching young kids and she's giving back what she learned to the country. All she's asking for is her immigration status. Why not give her a status if she has been contributing to America [long pause]? You know, being sent back to your home, which by the way when you left you were only five, is tough. What are you going to remember? It's going to be really hard for you to adapt, especially in countries where the economic level are drowning. So that's why I have been an advocate. I do that because I know the struggle, I've been there, done that and I'm still going through it.

Sheena's close connection to immigration is clear from her description. Based on her facial expressions, I could feel the care she had for others who were struggling with immigration policies in the United States. I did not respond to the questions she posed, instead I listened and sat with the pauses, which became uncomfortable for me because I now have the privilege of being a U.S. citizen. At times, I re-affirmed what she was saying and shared relatable stories around my professional work to support students who

are negatively impacted by their immigration status. Sheena's experiences and perspectives on immigration emerged at numerous points during my interview with her.

Rachel, who is on F-1 status and approved for OPT following her degree program, recalled her experience waiting for her OPT approval during her senior year in college and how it negatively impacted that final year. At the time of the interview, Rachel was only a few months removed from her undergraduate studies. She shared, "I had to apply to work here and that process took almost three months. It was harder for me as an international student to work here." The job search during her senior year was the most frustrating for Rachel. Although she had above-average grades and was involved on-campus, she was not able to secure employment prior to graduation. Rachel was also frustrated by the realization that OPT is viewed negatively by employers because it meant a potential employer would need to pay a significant cost to sponsor her, via H-1B petition, after one year so that she could remain in the U.S. and continue working. She believed this placed her at a disadvantage when competing against job candidates who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Employers' reluctance to file H-1B petitions is also based on an uptick in denials. The American Immigration Lawyers Association reported a more than 40% uptick in denials under the current administration.

The stories of Kerry, Sheena, and Rachel above portray nonimmigrant Caribbean student participants' experiences about their immigration status. Whether it was centered on involvement on campus, visa, employment, or travel, immigration status greatly impacted the experiences of the nonimmigrant Caribbean student participants. Their stories became personal for me. As a critical researcher, I had to balance listening and

controlling my own frustrations with a U.S. immigration system that I had personally struggled with as someone who luckily transitioned through five different immigration statuses (F-1, OPT, H1B, Permanent Resident, and U.S. citizen) since my arrival to the United States almost 20 years ago. Most concerning for me was learning that Caribbean students were experiencing the same problems that I encountered when I transitioned to the United States as a student. This was an indication that I was doing meaningful work because there is much work left to be done.

### **Immigrant Caribbean Student Participants' Disconnect to Immigration Status**

Caribbean student participants who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents were less connected to their immigration status and had more positive experiences at their undergraduate institution compared to Caribbean students who were nonimmigrants. Specifically, the emotional stories characterized by stress, anxiety and frustration shared by Caribbean student participants who were nonimmigrants did not emerge during the interviews with immigrants. The positive experiences of Caribbean student participants who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents were directly linked to their access to benefits such as employment, travel, and financial aid that were not easily available to the Caribbean student participants on F-1, TPS, and OPT statuses. While this was not a surprising finding, it was fascinating to analyze when juxtaposed with the experiences of U.S. citizens and permanent residents Caribbean students in the same study because of the numerous ways in which the narratives asserted the opposite of what had been shared by the participants who were on TPS, F-1, and OPT statuses.

Kim, a U.S. citizen from the island of Antigua, specifically mentioned that one of the motivating factors in her pursuit of higher education in the United States was the fact that she is a U.S. Citizen. She explained:

It was always in my parents' long-term plan for me to study in the United States. They travelled from Antigua to the United States to give birth to me so that I can reap the benefits of U.S. citizenship. I know that awareness of the educational opportunities in the United States was one of the reasons they did that. I did consider going to school in the Caribbean. I would have gone to the University of the West Indies campus in Mona, Jamaica if it was not for my U.S. citizenship status. When my family considered the fact that I was a U.S. citizen, they said why not take advantage of it and go live in the United States. I also wanted to come to the United States because it would be easier to study here.

Kim's story of her parents' travels to the United States to give birth to her may have been unique since no other Caribbean student participants shared similar stories. However, many participants from U.S. territories like Puerto Rico or those who were from non-U.S. territories with U.S. citizenship revealed stories about how they were prepared for higher education studies in the United States, a reflection of the privilege of being a U.S. citizen. For example, Wendy, a U.S. citizen from the Dominican Republic, attended a bilingual school in the Dominican Republic where classes were taught in both English and Spanish. She expressed gratitude for the exposure to college options in the United States that she received at the bilingual school. When Wendy became serious about majoring in graphic design, she knew her immigration status would not create any barriers as she explored higher education institutions in the United States.

There were a few Caribbean students who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents who engaged in dialogue around immigration status, and their perspectives were

vastly different than nonimmigrant Caribbean student participants. Some even supported current U.S. immigration policies that Caribbean students who were on F-1, TPS, and OPT detested. For example, Luiz had the following to say when immigration policies came up during the one-on-one interview:

Immigration status has not really impacted me because I was born in a Commonwealth of the United States – Puerto Rico. So I am an American by birth. I am 100% American. But I will tell you what I see even though I was born in Puerto Rico. I agree with some of the immigration policies in the United States. There is an immigration problem because there is a lot of illegal people coming into the United States. There are people who spend a lot of money to go through the correct process and become legal here in the United States. And of course, you have those who do not. And then you have the governor of California encouraging a bunch of people to come to this country illegally. I do understand the concern that the United States have as a country. There is a security concern, having people that you don't know and who are undocumented is a problem. I do think that the best way to handle it is to make it easier for people to come to the United States legally. I will say that I don't like illegal of anything but they should make it easier for those who are here.

Luiz's views were never shared by other nonimmigrant Caribbean student participants of this study. Still, it is worth noting that the participants who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents were more likely to talk about their status while those with F-1, TPS, and OPT status felt fear as a result of their immigration status. Hence, one of the core differences among Caribbean student participants and their experiences is centered on the ways immigration status and other aspects around immigration (including policies) impacts their experiences.

The academic literature on international students acknowledges that one of the significant challenges they face is the increasingly tense debate around immigration in the

United States. Unfortunately, the correlation between immigration status and the experiences of Caribbean students has never been thoroughly addressed in the literature on international students. This study addressed this gap by illuminating Caribbean student participants' stories around immigration status and the specific ways it has impacted their experiences. Tidwell and Hanassab (2007), in their study on international students in higher education, state, "Information regarding immigration regulations and visa requirements are areas of great concern for most, if not all, international students" (p. 321). Indeed, given the immigration debates in the U.S., international students will be forced to navigate bigoted immigration policies that may negatively impact their ability to travel, perpetuate on-campus employment discrimination, and create an underlying foundation for xenophobic behavior. The immigration stories shared by Caribbean student participants should be seriously considered as institutions of higher education strive to create support systems and welcoming environments for them. This is because the narratives shared by the participants illuminates challenges they have experienced because of their immigration status.

### **Language**

Through their stories, the participants revealed that language impacted their experiences in significant ways, and their environment played a role in influencing the extent of that impact. Spanish, French, English, Dutch, Haitian Creole and Papiamentu are the official languages spoken in the Caribbean. All the participants taken together spoke four of the six official languages of the Caribbean. While English was the dominant language of all participants, many also spoke French, Haitian Creole, and

Spanish. The juxtaposition of participants’ native language and the dominant language within their educational environment created both elements of comfort and discomfort as it relates to their experiences.

In this sub-theme, I report a nuanced finding about languages based on the experiences of Caribbean student participants at Pimenta State University, in comparison to the Caribbean student participants who did not attend Pimenta State University. Pimenta State University is a large Hispanic-serving institution in the southeast United States. There were 13 Caribbean student participants from Pimenta State University and five Caribbean student participants from three non-Hispanic serving institutions (Jamestown University, Thomas and Rolls College, and Abraham College). I think the most intriguing and useful information came from considering the experiences of the 13 students specifically at Pimenta State University. Of these students, six could speak Spanish and English, four spoke French and English, and three spoke English only as seen in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Caribbean Student Participants at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

<b>Name</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Island of Origin</b>
<b>Jane</b>	English	Jamaica
<b>Luiz</b>	Spanish, English	Puerto Rico
<b>Nadia</b>	Spanish, English	Dominican Republic
<b>Ramona</b>	French, English	Haiti

<b>Kelly</b>	Spanish, English	Puerto Rico
<b>Kim</b>	English	Antigua
<b>Rachel</b>	English	Bahamas
<b>Consetta</b>	Spanish, English	Cuba
<b>Sheena</b>	French, English	Haiti
<b>Jenny</b>	Spanish, English	Cuba
<b>Doria</b>	Dutch, French, English	St. Maarten
<b>Rena</b>	French, English	Haiti
<b>Wendy</b>	Spanish, English	Dominican Republic

Caribbean student participants from Dutch, English, and French-speaking islands who attended Pimenta State University expressed difficulty adjusting to a new language. Specifically, these were the students from Haiti, Bahamas, St. Maarten, and Jamaica. There were many students from Spanish-speaking islands and countries in Latin America who attended Pimenta State University. While Caribbean student participants from Spanish-speaking islands were comforted by this dynamic, that was not the case for Caribbean student participants from the Dutch, English, and French-speaking Caribbean islands. This challenge spread to multiple segments of their undergraduate curricular and co-curricular experiences. The following narratives and conversations capture the ways in which this dynamic unfolded for the Caribbean student participants at Pimenta State University.

## **Experiences of Non-Spanish Speaking Students at Pimenta State University**

To assist with providing a holistic understanding of the variety of Caribbean student participants, I will report on the experiences of non-Spanish speaking students at Pimenta State University. This is particularly significant because their experiences contrast with the experiences of Spanish-speaking Caribbean students at the same institution. As previously stated, Pimenta State University is a Hispanic-serving institution that enrolls approximately 48,166 undergraduate students and 8,700 graduate students. The experiences of thirteen Caribbean student participants from English and French-speaking Caribbean islands at Pimenta State University was centered on navigating a different language, Spanish. All participants who did not speak Spanish and attend Pimenta State University acknowledged some variation of a challenge in navigating an educational environment that was dominated by a language other than English.

Rachel, who is from the Bahamas and speaks English only, attended Pimenta State University and reflected on her experience at that institution. Rachel shared some of her struggles in this brief exchange when I inquired about her overall experience at Pimenta State University.

**Hazel:** I am interested in learning about your overall experience at Pimenta State University. What were some of the things you enjoyed? What were some of the challenges you encountered? How did you cope with them?

**Rachel:** Language was definitely a challenge. Most of the people in my class spoke Spanish and they did that a lot on campus. So if one person is speaking Spanish, they're gonna talk to this person in Spanish because maybe it makes them feel comfortable. And I felt like there are times when they didn't want to talk to me because I speak English. I mean a lot of the Spanish people get together

and sometimes I felt like I wasn't included. That was difficult because sometimes they speak in Spanish and I wouldn't know what they're saying. You know there were student organizations that I was interested in, for example the American Society of Civil Engineers. I was dissuaded to join that organization because there's a lot of people that are from the Caribbean but I don't feel like I relate to them because of that language piece. There are times when I did join because it would be like a big thing for my resume. So stuff like that made it challenging.

**Hazael:** Thank you so much for sharing this. I would have thought that being in the presence of other Caribbean students would make you feel welcome and part of the community. So, just to confirm, that was not the case for you?

**Rachel:** Yes, correct. There is more to it than that. I mean you can be in the presence of other Caribbean students and not connect with them if you can't relate. For me, language created a barrier to connecting.

Rachel's narrative underscores feeling ostracized, as she refrained from engaging in activities because of her unfamiliarity in navigating a different language. While this may have been an unintentional act, it points to one of the ways that language impacted the experiences of a Caribbean student participant from the English Caribbean islands at Pimenta State University. Language has been a site of resistance in postcolonial discourse, and Rachel's story provides an additional angle at which this dynamic could be explored. Within Rachel's narrative was the challenge of connecting to others which, according to her, "it hindered my willingness to get involved clubs and organizations or even approach my professors." Still, she demonstrated resilience by stepping outside her comfort zone and intentionally connecting with others. Rachel mentioned that she started learning Spanish and acknowledged, "I just needed to make friends so I can survive." So while Rachel experienced challenges, she was able to find ways to successfully navigate her environment.

Stories similar to Rachel's were echoed by the majority of Caribbean student participants from the English, Dutch, and French-speaking Caribbean islands who pursued their undergraduate studies at Pimenta State University. Jane, who was born and raised on the French-speaking island of Haiti and speaks both English and French, expressed concerns with navigating a new language as well. When I asked her about her overall experience at Pimenta State University, she shared:

Pimenta State University is really diverse in the sense that I see a lot of Caribbean students, faculty and staff. There is a big push for Caribbean-related activities. We have clubs, Caribbean association and all that stuff. The main challenge for me is the amount of Hispanic activities. You know Pimenta State is in Colihuat [pseudonym] and there are a lot of Hispanic-related things. This is understandable because there are a lot of Hispanic students. However, it can be a challenge because there is a big push to do stuff in Spanish and you know, I do not speak any Spanish. This has been challenging for me because I am not that comfortable with the language.

Similar to Rachel, Jane expressed feeling ostracized. She revealed that it was relatively easy to manage other aspects of university life as a Caribbean student, but she really struggled with the language. There were instances where Caribbean student participants from the Dutch, English and French-speaking Caribbean islands reported that faculty, whose native language is Spanish, would sometimes speak to select students in Spanish, which further contributed to the participants' feeling ostracized and isolated. These language implications for English and French-speaking Caribbean students were significant, including hindering their ability to make friends. Doria from the Dutch island of St. Maarten and who spoke English, French, and some Dutch described her challenges with making friends:

I had no friends and I think that was a big shocker for me because when I was in St. Maarten I had a lot of friends. So when I started at Pimenta State University I didn't have any friends. People weren't talking to me, I wasn't talking to people. I just find it like very awkward. There was just a lot of Spanish and I didn't know how to speak the language. Also, I tend to be the type of person to be shy when you just meet me, but I'm very outspoken after I get used to you. So I always wanted to approach them but I felt like I didn't know how they were going to accept me.

Doria's story is an example of a direct social implication of the language barrier.

This language barrier theme was woven throughout various aspects of Caribbean students' (from the English and French-speaking islands) encounters. Many shared their willingness and openness to learn the Spanish language as a way they navigated their environments. Others recalled their courageous behavior when they stepped outside of their comfort zone and joined clubs and organizations that were predominantly Hispanic to breakthrough initial fears that exist. In many ways, these actions demonstrate the resilient nature of the participants from the Dutch, English and French-speaking islands at Pimenta State University. Still, the stories and narratives they revealed alluded to discomfort about navigating a new language.

### **Experiences of Spanish-Speaking Caribbean Students at Pimenta State University**

In this study, all the participants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands attended Pimenta State University. The stories and narratives from the one-on-one interviews with these participants revealed they were comforted by the predominantly Spanish-speaking environment. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to frequently speak their native language and make both formal and informal connections with their peers from the same islands in the Caribbean. One of the most frequent points

mentioned by participants was the various Hispanic clubs and organization that existed at Pimenta State University. This benefited Spanish-speaking Caribbean student participants because it was familiar territory. So while the Spanish-speaking Caribbean student participants had to become familiar to a new institution, there were various social, cultural, and academic resources and practices that offered comfort while they adjusted to the university.

Kelly, who is from Puerto Rico and speaks both Spanish and English, was able to go back and forth between speaking Spanish and English at Pimenta State University, allowing her to maintain her bilingualism. She also acknowledged how easy it was for her to make connections with other students, faculty, and administrators from Spanish-speaking countries at the school. She explained:

I haven't met a Puerto Rican over here, but I've met a Colombian and I've met Cuban. It feels like we're all Hispanic bunched together which is great. We help each other because we have similar language and culture.

This was important for Kelly as a first-year student adjusting to life in a new country and institution. By having that level of familiarity, it made her overall experience more positive. Luiz, Nadia, and Jenny who are all from Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands and attend Pimenta State University, shared similar sentiments. Specifically, they all felt connected to the community around them because there were others who connected to their upbringing. Jenny summarized it perfectly saying, "There was added fellowship because of having others who speak the same language at Pimenta State University." This served as an example of the type of comfort the environment at

Pimenta State University provided to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean student participants.

Regardless of the comfort experienced by participants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands at Pimenta State University, there were still some nuances in language. Underpinning this nuance was the fact that the participants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands gauge their undergraduate experience not only from the encounters they had on their campus, but also the encounters in the greater community. So though comforted within the confines of Pimenta State University, there were experiences that occurred off-campus that impacted their experiences in negative ways. In the previous chapter, I shared how Consetta, a Caribbean student from the island of Cuba who attended Pimenta State University, shared a negative experience with language and associated that experience with racism. Consetta believed that her, “Spanish language exposed me to racism.” So, while this study reveals an overall positive experience for Spanish-speaking Caribbean students at Pimenta State University, there are instances that can lead to negative experiences. In the case of Consetta, we have a negative experience that occurred off-campus but transcended to her on-campus experience. Consetta shared this experience bothered her for weeks and it ultimately impacted the way she interacted with native English-speakers who were White.

This sub-theme revealed that attention should be given to the native language of Caribbean students, including awareness around the ways the language in their academic environment may hinder or complement their experiences. Gautum et al. (2016) revealed, in recent research about international students’ experiences, that language barriers are one

of the challenges that international students face in their new environments, including not speaking English as fluently. By juxtaposing the experiences of non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean student participants with that of the experiences of Spanish-speaking Caribbean student participants at Pimenta State University, it becomes evident how being able to speak or not speak the dominant language of the environment can help students feel comfortable or isolated. Still, as seen in the case of Consetta, the nuances around race must be considered because it is possible to be comforted by familiarity with language while experiencing other negative experiences because of an aspects of one's identity.

### **Commonalities in Caribbean Student Participants' Experiences**

There were two consistent commonalities that emerged when analyzing the experiences of Caribbean students who participated in this study: (a) participants' need for financial support and (b) family as priority. I specifically found the income and wealth factors of participants and their families to be relevant to their understanding of their status. This is not a new dynamic as scholars (see Melville & Wint, 2008) have provided perspectives on poverty in the Caribbean countries and its related problem. In this study, participants admitted that they depended on financial aid, scholarships, and income from on and off campus jobs to pay for their undergraduate studies. And, in most instances, attending an institution of higher education would not have been possible without financial assistance.

The second commonality was centered on who and what influenced participants' move to the United States. Parents and other family members were a common denominator when considering Caribbean student participants move to pursue their

undergraduate studies in the United States. Whether it was a parent who pushed their student to take advantage of U.S. citizenship status or because of family members already residing in the United States, the commonality around their move to the United States was embedded within a family connection. Furthermore, I highlight this theme not because of its commonality so much as how it seems to impact the participants' experiences. The stories that follow provide insights on how income and wealth, as well as family, played an instrumental role in the experiences of the Caribbean student participants.

### **Need for Financial Support**

A consistent narrative among Caribbean student participants was around financial support. This is noteworthy because many institutions of higher education in the United States do not offer scholarships or financial incentives to international students. In this study, nine of the eighteen participants were international students. Both the immigrant and nonimmigrant Caribbean student participants alluded to needing financial support to pursue their education. The literature on international students reveals that colleges and universities have been engaged in recruiting them as a source of revenue (Alfateh, 2016). This is unfortunate because the importance of these students extends beyond the amounts of money they bring to their institution. International students make useful political, cultural, social, and educational contributions (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Still, campuses are never inclined to provide financial assistance to international students. The stories of the majority of Caribbean student participants point to their dependence on funding

sources from their institution, local government, and family sponsors in order to attend college.

Kerry, a college junior and scholarship student athlete from Tobago, talked in detail about her finances. She revealed the following when I inquired about her move from the Caribbean to the United States. Our brief exchange is reflective of the need for continued financial assistance that many Caribbean student participants shared.

**Kerry:** My family and I were not financially stable. The currency in Trinidad is different so my family and I had to think through that. I reached out to a lot of people in Trinidad and Tobago for financial assistance. I wanted to know who could help sponsor me so I could go to school. And it resulted in a Tobago family who helped me. They sponsor me for the first two years and then my scholarship increased. I was able to have extra money to buy books and stuff like that. After my second year of college my coach helped by offering more scholarship money and I also became a Resident Advisor (RA). That really helped me financially.

**Hazael:** Thank you for sharing that. What happened in your second year and beyond? Did you find that finances continued to be a challenge? If yes, how did you manage to get through given the circumstance.

**Kerry:** After my second year my soccer coach wanted me to come back, and I had to explain to him that the Trinidad government had already given me the maximum financial package. My coach said as long as you stick to being an RA, that is one less expense that me and the University have to worry about. And then he agreed to give me the balance of the money so that I can continue going to school. I really wanted to stay in school. This is going to be my 3rd year being an RA and it has been well so far. Also this is also going to be my 2<sup>nd</sup> year being the soccer captain. I consider myself very lucky to be here given my financial situation.

At the time of the interview, I did not inquire further about whether the family sponsor received anything in return. Kerry mentioned she knew of the family through a close family member and that her family was grateful for the assistance. Her comments emphasize how financial assistance was a deciding factor as to whether she could travel

to the United States to pursue higher education studies. Her comments and the overall exchange I had with Kerry is an example of the financial struggles that Caribbean student participants encountered through their undergraduate studies and how they navigated such challenges. Kerry repeatedly mentioned how her family was grateful for the financial assistance.

Kerry's insights on currency exchange was thought-provoking. Currencies had significant implications for some Caribbean student participants. There are 14 currencies serving multiple Caribbean islands; these include the United States dollar, the Eastern Caribbean Dollar, and the Euro. Caribbean student participants from Puerto Rico (a U.S. territory) did not acknowledge the exchange rate whereas those from Caribbean islands such as Antigua (Eastern Caribbean Dollar), St. Marten (the Euro), and Haiti (Haitian Gourde) briefly alluded to the advantages and disadvantages of the exchange rate. This dynamic was briefly mentioned by Caribbean student participants from Caribbean islands where the currencies have been traditionally weak against the U.S. dollar. For example, in Kerry's case, the exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the Trinidadian Dollar was \$1 U.S. to 7 TT dollars at the time of the interview, which is a significant disparity.

The need for financial support theme continued as participants searched for scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial assistance to offset the cost of college after they had arrived in the United States. Kerry acknowledged having to become a Resident Advisor to assist with the financial burden associated with attending college in the United States. Typically, this job comes with free on-campus housing, a meal plan, and sometimes also a stipend. At the same time, it can be a time-consuming job, with

significant responsibilities. This is something both Kim, a senior from Antigua, and Mimi, an alumna from Jamaica, mentioned during their interviews as well. Kim attended Pimenta State University and stated that being a Resident Advisor after transferring from a community college was of great financial assistance to her. Specifically, she claimed, “Being a Resident Advisor provided financial benefits that I needed.” Mimi attended Abraham College and explained how fortunate she was to secure a Resident Advisor position given the financial benefits. Specifically, she shared it allowed her to, “reduce the out-of-pocket expenses” in addition to other scholarship she received.

Other narratives around finances surfaced as I learned about each participants’ background. Consetta, who is from Cuba and attends Pimenta State University, had the following to say regarding her ability to secure financial scholarships which ultimately made it possible for her to enroll:

I guess my biggest academic success was the scholarships I obtained in order to get the education that I am currently getting at Pimenta State University. Without these scholarships, my family doesn't make enough money for me to attend college. Like I worked hard throughout high school and was able to obtain the Jim Blue [pseudonym] scholarship which covers the cost of my studies here at Pimenta State University. I also got this academic excellence scholarship which has been a big part of covering the cost of my studies. So if I didn't have things like Jim Blue scholarship and this academic excellence scholarship, I wouldn't have been able to attend college, at least not here in the United States. So when I think of academic success, I think about having the necessary monies to pay for my education.

Consetta’s acknowledgement that a financial scholarship was a major academic success illuminates the impact it had on her experience. Throughout the interview, Consetta referenced how grateful she was to be awarded an opportunity to pursue her education

with very little expenses. She spoke in great length regarding her family dynamics in Cuba. Consetta explained that education in Cuba would be free but cited numerous downsides to staying in Cuba. She stated:

In Cuba, no one has any real freedom. You can't openly oppose the person in charge of the island. So just given that danger, my mom and my dad thought that it would be best to flee the country. So a lot of people came to Lorez [pseudonym] from Cuba trying to run away from that. So for me to go back there to study it would be free education, but it would mean that there's a lot of limits to what I'm allowed to believe in if I were to stay in the country and there's a lot of poverty so it was just the better choice I guess to stay here in the United States.

Although the Caribbean is not a bad choice for higher education, there are factors that deterred Caribbean student participants from staying in the region to pursue their education. Family members were instrumental in assessing financial conditions in their home island and convincing their children that it may be best to consider educational opportunities in the United States. Kelly, a sophomore at Pimenta State University, explained:

Well, I mean the schools came after but we moved here because we had family and my mom got transferred here so she had to choose between Lorez and Portsmouth [pseudonym] and we liked Lorez better. It was next to the coast, the atmosphere and the city has a really big art industry and I wanted to focus on studying art. So my parents moved here also to kind of encourage me to keep studying art. And I ended up at Pimenta State University because it is really good school and they gave me really good financial aid. In addition to the good financial aid that I received from the school, the state of North Rima [pseudonym] has a special scholarship called Jim Blue [pseudonym]. So at Pimenta State University, my tuition was paid off because of the Jim Blue scholarship. I decided to stay in state for two years, one or two years to do my general education credits and maybe even up to my associate's degree.

While Kelly's story emphasizes how Caribbean families make decisions about where to live, it also highlights the importance of scholarships and other financial incentives. A similar narrative around scholarships and financial aid opportunities was mentioned by Damian, who attends Jamestown University. His experience was different in the sense that he did not have any intentions to attend an institution of higher education in the United States until he learned that there was a possibility of receiving financial assistance. He stressed the importance of the financial assistance in this exchange:

**Hazael:** So tell me about your journey to the United States and what ultimately influenced your decision to study at Jamestown University?

**Damian:** Well I remember it being my final year in high school and I was just on the internet looking at different colleges. I felt I was behind because it appeared that everybody already had their life planned out to go to college and stuff like that. Many of classmates were either going to college in the United States or in Bahamas. I wasn't even planning to go to college quite frankly, I just wanted to go to flight school, but you know, I waited a year to see if my decision was going to change and it did. My family's close friend came to Jamestown University and he graduated, then he told my parents about the school and I was able to talk to other Bahamian students who studied Aviation at that school. They told me about it, and I became excited because international students get a \$20,000 scholarship. That was the main thing that caught our eyes. College in the United States is very expensive and my family could not take on that big bill for college.

**Hazael:** So, you get a \$20,000 scholarship? Is that for four years or did it apply every year? How does that work?

**Damian:** Actually the scholarship was for every year. \$10,000 for the fall semester and \$10,000 for the spring semester. It was the main factor that allowed me to study here in the United States and I would have not been here without it.

Damian was knowledgeable about his family's finances, the cost of attending college, and his financial aid package. Other Caribbean students had similar deep understanding of finances when it comes to paying for college. At a focus group

interview, participants referenced financial assistance (through scholarships, financial aid, and family assistance) as a factor that allowed them the opportunity to pursue their undergraduate studies. They did so with much precision, often citing the exact amount of the aid. For example, Richard, a participant at the focus group who received the same scholarship package as Damian states, “When I heard about the \$20,000 scholarship, I knew this was the school I needed to come to.” This heightened level of awareness about finances demonstrates the very practical factors that they weighed in deciding to study in the United States.

International students studying in the United States are often treated as a dependable source of steady income and many higher-level administrators operate under the notion that they are, at a minimum financially stable and in many instances, wealthy. Organizations such as NAFSA have supported these claims by conducting analyses that details the economic impact of international students on the U.S. economy. Specifically, in a 2017 report, NAFSA asserted:

International students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$36.9 billion to the U.S. economy and support over 450,000 jobs. The economic contributions of international students are in addition to the immeasurable academic and cultural values these students bring to campuses and local communities.

Such reports can be misleading and allow administrators to stereotype international students as being wealthy. The students’ descriptions and narratives disrupt that stereotype and should remind all at institutions of higher education to check their assumptions as they aim to globalize their campuses and attract more international

students. I believe the stories of Caribbean student participants should prompt a shift in thinking and approach regarding how international students are perceived financially. In the final chapter of this study, I elaborate on connections between this behavior and former colonial practices using the following question as a foundation: How can institutions of higher educational provide financial support to Caribbean and other international students who wants to pursue their studies in the United States?

### **Family as Priority**

Narratives around family were woven throughout the experiences of the Caribbean student participants of this study. These included playing an instrumental role in transitioning the Caribbean student participants to the United States, providing guidance and support, and helping maintain participants' Caribbean culture and identity. Within these narratives, I found that family members of Caribbean student participants were strategic about positioning their students to be able to access a U.S. based education, even going through extreme measures in a few cases. Consequently, Caribbean student participants were appreciative of their family's efforts and dedication, and this appreciation factored into how they allowed family members to influence their decision to study in the U.S., what institution to attend, what major to pursue, and what career to strive for. Also regarding family, I found that participants credited their courage and success to the discipline instilled in them by their families prior to arrival in the United States. Everything considered, the Caribbean student participants' stories point to the many ways their families were instrumental in providing support and guidance as they navigated challenges in college.

Ramona, a first-year student from Haiti attending Pimenta State University, described how being in a city with family created a natural sense of community. When I asked Ramona about the reason for deciding to attend an institution of higher education in the United States, she explained:

I mean the obvious answer is little Haiti. It is like a second home for us in a sense, but the main reason is my dad is here and he brought us here. We decided to stay here because of the community. So, because of that we are here in Lorez [pseudonym]. As far as Pimenta State University, it is because of my Mom. She went to Pimenta State University while she was here and that is where she finished her career. So, that is why I came to Pimenta State University.

Ramona connected the presence of family to a sense of community. In fact, she referenced family throughout the interview, citing them as the main reason why she has been successful in college. When Ramona discussed how she coped with academic and social challenges at school, she remarked that she “spent hours on the phone” processing with her family. She claimed that the close geographical proximity to her family provided “an additional layer of comfort” and support as she navigated various aspects of her collegiate experience.

Embedded within the family narratives of Caribbean student participants were deep feelings of awareness and appreciation for their families’ efforts and care for them as children in the Caribbean. Most participants expressed gratitude towards their families because of the sacrifice they made to get them to the United States. For example, Doria remarked:

My grandparents and most of my family lived here already. I believe we were the only ones of our family that was living in St. Maarten. And so my grandma, she filed the immigration paperwork for us - that's including my mom and I. My mom is a single parent and she was lucky to get a good job here. She was a teacher for 27 years. But because of me she decided to move so that I could have an opportunity for higher education. The higher education system in St. Maarten is not really the best. The lower education level are very good. When it comes to colleges, there's only one college and it's not accredited. So because of this my mother decided to move to the United States where I could have more opportunity.

Doria commended her mother's forward-thinking approach regarding opportunities for education at various points during the interview. She believed that her mother made "a big sacrifice" for her given she was a single parent. Consetta, who is a college senior from Cuba attending Pimenta State University, shared similar sentiments. She articulated that, "my mother was lucky to have won U.S. visas that opened the door for us travel to the United States." Consetta explained during the interview that her family instilled in her as a young child that coming to the United States would provide better opportunities in terms of education, employment, economic stability, and healthcare. She shared about the political instability in Cuba and that studying in Cuba was never a real option for her. She claimed the lack of freedom encouraged her family to flee the country.

Caribbean student participants also discussed the ways their families were able to provide support and guidance, which was designed to ensure that they would be successful once they arrived in the United States. Families did so by accompanying their students to college and being highly present in their lives during the first few weeks or by having a family member or friend in the vicinity who could help in the transition. This was true regardless of the institution type or the region of the Caribbean. Damian, a

sophomore attending Jamestown University, recalled arriving in the small town where his institution is located and being grateful that he had his mother and grandmother at his side to comfort him. He shared, “I remember arriving in this small town, looking around and then saying- ohh shit!!What did I get myself into? This place could not have been more different than the Bahamas. Everything was strange to me.” Damian then shared that this is where he saw the value of having his family present with him for the move from Bahamas to the United States. He claimed what was most beneficial at the time was having his family by his side.

Nadia, who is from the Dominican Republic, shared a similar appreciation for family presence when she first arrived in the United States. She recalled:

I'm from the Dominican Republic and my parents brought me here. I didn't have a choice. I had to come here. I didn't want to come here because it was a different place, and I didn't know what to expect...But I am thankful that my parents was there with me every step of the way which really helped me.

To Nadia, family support was helpful to her maintaining her cultural roots. She shared numerous examples of how her family being present was instrumental to her success as she progressed through this segment of the interview. Nadia experienced challenges when she first arrived in the United States and would often lean on her family for support, calling and seeking guidance as she encountered these challenges.

Family members were also integral in allowing Caribbean student participants to maintain their Caribbean identity. Most Caribbean student participants shared how migrating to the United States for their undergraduate studies was a great opportunity and

experience but there were some downsides. In these situations, they again leaned on their family to help in maintaining their sense of culture. For example, Kelly, who is from Puerto Rico and attending Pimenta State University, described how her family helped keep American culture from, “invading their culture.” Kelly’s comments were engrossing because while Puerto Rico is a commonwealth of the United States, Kelly saw it as a distinct country. She explained:

I think having my family here is like having a small piece of Puerto Rico here with me. My family is the base of my culture. It is hard to maintain what a country has instilled in you when you are no longer living there but when you're with a group of people who understands, like your family, it really helps. I came from a big family, four siblings. Our values often cycle around family. When my mom cooks a Puerto Rican dish and when we go see my sister upstate, we're still practicing those values. So it doesn't feel like the American culture is kind of invading too much, which is good.

I believe this gets at the complex relationship that can exist when individuals leave countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries. And, how family can serve as the foundation that connects Caribbean students to their culture. Kelly’s comments indicate that her family allowed her to maintain her Puerto Rican roots. Not only were Kelly’s words strong evidence of her feelings about the topic, the way she spoke the words was also passionate, leaving me to conclude that there was no substitute for the vital role her family has played in her experiences.

The participants’ narratives around family brought back personal memories for me of my transition to the United States as a Caribbean student. I did not get the opportunity to have my parents accompany me to the United States, but I did all I could

to maintain connections with them once I arrived here for school. The very few monies that was sent to me by my family was spent buying calling cards so I could know how they were doing. Like many of the participants in this study, it was about maintaining aspects of my Dominican culture through personal updates and stories that I was missing since I no longer lived there, a reminder that I should not forget about my upbringing. I also felt more supported when I had conversations with my family by knowing they were present in my life from a distance. There was no replacement for family in the lives of the Caribbean student participants who transitioned to the United State for their undergraduate studies.

### **Natural Disasters and the Families of Caribbean Student Participants**

Natural disasters are a way of life in the Caribbean islands. The small islands are surrounded by three interacting bodies of water (Gulf of Mexico, Atlantic Ocean, and Caribbean Sea) while also sitting on top of active volcanoes and restless tectonic plates. This leads to earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic activity, storm surges, and tsunamis, all of which can have catastrophic impacts in the region. This is not new information; news organizations in the United States broadcast the damage from hurricanes and storms to islands such as Puerto Rico, Haiti, St. Maarten, Dominica, and most recently, the Bahamas. However, the participants relayed stories that described the impact and aftereffects of these disasters at the level of the individual family. The information provided by the participants evoked personal memories for me of how my family in Dominica has dealt with disasters, and I sometimes offered up my own experiences with the participants, leading to extended discussions about the topic. I believe that human

systems related to power and privilege impacted how the islands coped with the storms. Support and lack thereof, poor response times, depleted island infrastructures, and corruption all exacerbated the impacts.

All participants from the island of Haiti discussed how the 2010 Haitian earthquake had an impact on their family. For example, Ramona, who is currently attending Pimenta State University, offered this reflection:

The Haitian earthquake was good and bad thing in the way that it impacted us. It was bad in the sense that our country got devastated and changed completely. Things got worse over there. But for my family, it gave us an opportunity to better ourselves. My father went to the University in Canada after the earthquake happened and he ended up living there his entire life. So, that gave him an opportunity to bring the rest of the family to Canada and that actually helped us because now I actually think that we are doing very well. So, in a sense it was good because it gave us an opportunity but it was also bad because it was our country and it got really bad in our country. People now know Haiti as this really poor place because of how the media portrayed it during the Earthquake. So, that is how it impacted us.

This was a powerful moment during my interview with Ramona. She detested the ways Haiti was portrayed in the media because, according to Ramona, “the media only focused on the negative things and not the ways Haiti was recovering and actually doing ok.” Other Haitian student participants felt the same way. Rena, a junior studying Graphic Design at Pimenta State University, acknowledged the devastating impacts the Haitian earthquake had on her family and how she worked to combat that. She talked about a video on Haitian culture that she made for a class project capturing many positive aspects of Haitian culture and its people. Specifically, she shared:

I always want to give people a more true depiction of Haiti instead of what they know which is about the earthquake and how poor Haiti is. I think it was Women's month and I made this video about Haitian culture for a class project. It ended up receiving a large number of shares on Facebook and it was featured on my schools website...sharing about my Haitian culture and having people view Haiti positively was satisfying to me.

After our interview, Rena shared the video with me, which I watched. I felt compelled to follow-up with Rena via phone to let her know how impressed I was with her work and dedication towards this project. It demonstrated the resilient and peaceful nature of the Haitian people, something that is not often shared in the media. While the participants from Haiti acknowledged that the Haitian earthquake negatively impacted their families, there was a desire to ensure that the many positive aspects of Haiti were not erased and replaced by this one disaster.

Natural disasters created a sense of fear among participants because of the unknown potential risk of the summer season and how it might affect their families or them travelling home during the summer holidays. The hurricane season in the Caribbean runs through the summer months, from June 1 to October 1 every year. Kelly, a sophomore at Pimenta State University, talked about this fear as she recalled the devastation that happened in Puerto Rico due to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, two catastrophic hurricanes that passed in 2017. Kelly explained that the hurricane season is a traumatizing time for her family because of what had happened with the storms in 2017. Although Hurricanes Irma and Maria were the basis of her discussion around natural disasters, she also talked about other events that impact the island of Puerto Rico. The Caribbean experiences natural disasters at a more significant level than most parts of the

world. Hence, based on how the participants value their families, one can anticipate they could be easily triggered by their worry for their family if there is something happening on the islands while they are away. Hence, I would like to end with this question – do schools pay sufficient attention to the natural, political, and economic conditions of the student’s home countries in an effort to provide reasonable support and resources?

### **Conclusion**

The stories of Caribbean student participants reveal the differences within and among their experiences were immigration status and language while the commonalities were centered on the need for financial support and the ways they prioritize family. The similarities were particularly nuanced because there were differences embedded within it, highlighting the diversity that exists in the Caribbean region while illuminating the need for a tailored approach to assist Caribbean students in their transition to a new country and educational institution. Participants’ narratives show that immigration remains a contentious topic in the United States today, particularly for those who were nonimmigrants. This aligns with Akanwa’s (2015) claim that immigration laws in the U.S. continue to be a negative factor that have long affected international students’ experiences in higher education. Also, within the similarities in the Caribbean student participants, language needs to be thoroughly explored because the diverse make up of an educational institution could impact a student’s experience, as is evidenced by the 13 Caribbean student participants who attended Pimenta State University. However, the fact that there were so many participants from Pimenta State University is a big factor in this finding.

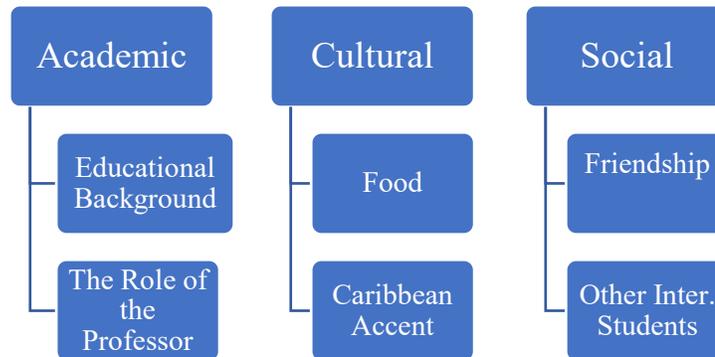
The participants' stories trouble the assumption that international students are able to comfortably pay for their higher education studies. Hegarty (2014) states, "The number of international students present at a university makes a significant contribution to the personality of that institution, and also to its financial well-being. With the majority of international students paying full tuition, the importance of their presence in American academic life cannot be underscored" (p. 225). The problematic nature of this claim was exposed in this study and it serves as a useful reminder to us that research on the economic stability of international students may be skewed by, for example, the generous scholarships offered by some countries. Lastly, this study found that family played an integral part in the experiences of the Caribbean student participants. With growing climate change, it is likely there will be more and increasingly destructive natural disasters in the Caribbean, as evidenced by hurricane Dorian which obliterated two islands in the Bahamas. This impacts students' relationships and worries about family members, which impacts their schooling experiences. Hence, more attention should be given to the role colleges and universities should play in helping Caribbean students stay connected to their families. As scholars continue to inquire about the experiences of Caribbean students, these factors must be carefully examined.

CHAPTER VI  
ACADEMIC, CULTURAL, AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCES OF CARIBBEAN  
STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

In this chapter, I reveal the ways Caribbean student participants navigated their academic, cultural, and social experiences as they pursued their undergraduate studies. I start by sharing, under the themes educational background and discipline, how participants credited the strict, exam-driven educational system that exists in the Caribbean for their academic success. To highlight their academic experiences, Caribbean student participants consistently pointed to professors, and emphasized the ways their professors contributed to or hindered their academic success. I report this dichotomy in two subthemes: (a) negative experiences with professors and (b) positive experiences with professors. Then, I share narratives from the interviews that depict how the Caribbean student participants perceived their cultural experiences. Stories around food and foreign accent were central to their cultural experiences. Finally, I report Caribbean student participants' challenges of making friends and their connections to Caribbean and other international students, which served as the base of their social experiences. This chapter answers the final research question of this dissertation:

Question 3: In what ways do Caribbean students navigate their academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the U.S. that might enable an improved understanding of their experience

Figure 6.1 Summary of Participants' Academic, Cultural, and Social Experiences



### **Navigating Academic Experiences**

In participants' discussions it became clear that a major influence in navigating academic experiences in college as Caribbean students was the students' educational background. This included the academic preparation they received while in school in the Caribbean, as well as the work ethic and discipline they acquired from growing up in the Caribbean. Furthermore, a significant aspect of their academic experience was focused on the impact professors had on their academic experiences. Although it was not an explicit goal to learn about participants' interactions with professors in this study, it was consistently mentioned. This was surprising for me because I expected the participants to focus on their experiences in the classroom. The majority of the Caribbean student participants reported positive experiences with their professors, but there were a few who had negative experiences. In the subsections that follow, I include narratives that provide context around this theme.

## **Educational Background**

All participants of this study grew up in the Caribbean and none had lived in the United States for more than eight years, a requirement for participation in this study. Participants chose a wide range of academic majors, including psychology, finance, criminal justice, special education, architecture, mathematics, human resources and international business, engineering, sociology, religious studies, aviation, political science, physical therapy, business, communication science, graphic design, and fine arts at the four institutions of higher education they attended. Regardless of academic major and institution they attended, participants claimed the Caribbean's primary education system was more demanding than the equivalent K-12 or higher education educational system they experienced in the United States, which made for a successful academic transition. Participants shared, from their own personal experiences in both educational systems, that schooling in the Caribbean demanded more studying, homework, and attentiveness in the classroom which ultimately benefited them when they arrived in the United States. This finding aligns with what has been reported by scholars who have investigated the academic experiences of Caribbean students (see Edwards-Joseph & Baker, 2014; Moses, 2018).

Schrouder (2008) states, "The British education system continued to dominate the English-speaking Caribbean even after the 1960s" (p. 273). In the English Caribbean's British-inherited primary education system, it is still customary for students to complete five years of secondary education (high school) and to graduate at around age 16. Whenever possible, and as reported by two participants from the English-speaking

Caribbean, some enroll in two-year college upon graduation from high school.

Participants of this study who experienced high school in the Caribbean believe this contributed to their academic success once they arrived in the United States. According to many participants, this is because of “the demanding nature of schools in the Caribbean,” which they claimed contributed to their academic success when they arrived in the United States.

Rachel, an alumna of Pimenta State University who majored in Engineering, shared about her academic experience in the Bahamas and how it contributed to her success. She attended five years of high school and then College of the Bahamas before transitioning to Pimenta State University as a first-year student. Rachel shared the following:

I attended College of the Bahamas back home which made it very easy for me once I started college here. The course materials here in America is not complicated in comparison to what I was used to. Now, it was different coming to Pimenta State University, but it wasn't hard academically. I believe the schooling that I had back in the Bahamas prepared me for this...it really helped that I had so many years of school in Bahamas before coming to Pimenta State University as a freshman.

Rachel emphasized how her schooling in the Bahamas adequately prepared her for higher education studies in the United States. This led to her feeling comfortable with the course materials at Pimenta State University. There were other Caribbean student participants who shared similar sentiments. For example, Kim, who is a senior majoring in Human Resource Management and International Business at Pimenta State University, mentioned, “I completed state college in Antigua after graduating from high school,

which made my academic transition much smoother...there was always a lot homework, exams, and class assignments that made me feel like I was always studying.” This was one of the references made by Kim that highlights the demanding nature of the college, which she linked to her preparation for higher education studies in the United States.

Because many Caribbean student participants felt prepared academically, they often compared their academic experience in the Caribbean to what they experienced in the United States to demonstrate how the Caribbean education system was more demanding. Doria, a senior who have been living in the United States for four years, illuminated this when she compared her academics in St. Maarten to academics at Pimenta State University. While she mentioned some of the complexities associated with higher education in St. Maarten (for example prospective students who resided on the Dutch side of the island needed to travel to Holland for higher education), her primary focus was on the demanding nature of the high school in St. Maarten. She states:

For me, academics is way easier in the United States. I feel like in St. Maarten they demanded more. And I think even in other Caribbean islands they demanded more. There were more materials to read, more exams to take and things that are just more difficult in general. Here, in America, it's very easy. You even have the option to do online classes. That's not really an option in St. Maarten. So it was easier. I even think about access to the books, like I can get the pdf version online in America. You have easier access to education materials in the United States.

Doria's description of the additional expectations (more materials to read, more exams to take) are her evidence for why education in St. Maarten is more difficult than in the United States. Additionally, Doria's remarks highlight another concept, that of access. Specifically, she claims that having the opportunity “to take classes virtually,” an option

not available in her home island of St. Maarten, makes it easier. Kim, who attends Pimenta State University, also discussed access and its connection to academic success when she shared, “Assignments are never online. We mostly have to go home and write open ended questions which makes it more intense.” Both Kim and Doria associated all these traits to an easier academic experience in the United States in comparison to their home country.

In an in-person focus group discussion at Jamestown University with Damian, Richard, and Kennedy, the notion that schooling was easier in the United States was very clear. Damian, Richard, and Kennedy all attended high school in the Bahamas before transitioning to Jamestown University to pursue their undergraduate studies. When I asked them about their experiences transitioning to a new educational system, they all agreed that the academic expectation in the United States is not as high. Specifically, Richard acknowledged, “The way that we do Math in the Bahamas is slightly different, but the overall concept is the same and I believe it is much easier in the United States...when I first arrived I felt like I had gone back a grade level or two.” This made the academic transition to the United States relatively easy to navigate for the participants.

There was one Caribbean student participant who did not refer to the same strong academic preparation that other participants spoke about. That participant was Nadia, an alumna of Pimenta State University, who attended high school in the United States. Nadia claimed, “I wasn’t focused on my academics. I started college and I was just doing the same thing that I did in high school. Just going through all the emotions.” I share later

in this chapter how a professor was able to get Nadia back on track and she was eventually successful academically. This is an example of the nuances that often came with the students' narratives around various aspects of their experiences. Nadia claimed that her family was concerned about her being exposed to drugs in the United States and that she was distracted when she first arrived here. While I believe Nadia is an outlier, it challenges me to think critically regarding the interpretation of the educational background theme of this dissertation.

As a critical researcher, I listened attentively to what my participants had to say about the demanding nature the secondary education system in the Caribbean. As someone who has been through this educational system as a high school student in the Caribbean, I do agree that it is more demanding. However, I now have concerns with the exam-focused aspect of the Caribbean's education system and its inability to cater to the needs of different students and educators. During my five years attending high school in the Caribbean, I was not encouraged to think critically, challenge teachers, or go against what has been set in place. We were simply trained for the exams, specifically the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) exams which, at the time I was in high school, determined eligibility for attendance in the local two-year college. This overall behavior and the perspectives shared by the Caribbean student participants are closely connected to the colonization of the Caribbean, which I will discuss in more detail in the final chapter of this dissertation.

## **Work Ethic and Discipline**

As Caribbean student participants proudly shared about their academic success, they often referenced the discipline they had acquired in the Caribbean. For example, Kerry, who is a junior from the island of Tobago majoring in Criminal Justice, acknowledged some differences with the U.S. teaching styles in comparison to what she had experienced in Tobago. In doing so, she credited the discipline she acquired in Tobago for her abilities to succeed academically. She asserted:

The academic experience back home is harder than here in the United States. Back home you have to figure it out, up here they give you resources, a lot of resources. I mean I have been on the Dean's list every semester I have been here, and my academic standings have been great. You know, the learning expectations and how they teach is different but it is easier overall. But I also believe that it comes down to the discipline.

Kerry's acknowledgement of resources is important to highlight because she had discussed taking advantage of numerous services offered by her institution during her interview. She indicated her discipline, which was connected to her desire to succeed academically, allowed her to inquire and take advantage of these resources. Kelly, who is sophomore from Puerto Rico majoring in Mathematics, also discussed discipline and connected it to academic success. Throughout the interview, Kelly mentioned how serious she took "class attendance, participation, or just studying long hours" to feel overconfident with the course materials.

To give further credit to discipline for their academic success, some Caribbean student participants discussed the academic work ethic that was needed to survive in the Caribbean. For example, when I asked Ramona, a first-year student from Haiti majoring

in architecture at Pimenta State University, questions around various aspects of her academic experience it came back to the discipline and work ethic that was inherited during her upbringing in the Caribbean. She shared the following:

I mean, overall academics and classes were easy for me. I have always done good at school. The main thing was in Haiti I got the discipline. My mother and my aunt back in Haiti would tell me I need to be disciplined to survive in school. So I would say that is a major thing that helped me to be successful in the United States. I am just disciplined; I studied a lot harder. My mindset was that if I did not do this right or if I did not succeed in school, I would be considered a failure by my family. Because of that discipline that I got in Haiti, I was determined to be successful. So coming here it was a lot easier because I didn't have anyone on my back and I didn't need anyone because of that background that I have from Haiti.

Embedded within Ramona's narrative was this notion of pressure to succeed academically. She viewed her success as an opportunity to not disappoint her family. Other Caribbean student participants shared similar narratives around familial pressure. So, academic success was not intended to be selfish for the Caribbean student participants. Instead, given the strong connections participants had with their family, as evident by the family as priority theme reported in Chapter V, participants wanted to ensure that their families were not disappointed.

Caribbean student participants of this study reported that their educational background and the discipline they acquired growing up in the Caribbean were instrumental factors in navigating their academic experiences. This finding aligns with the literature on Caribbean student' academic experiences. A study by Arline Edwards-Joseph and Stanley Baker (2014), which involved surveying 72 Caribbean students, revealed educational background as one of the factors that influenced Caribbean students'

academic success and self-efficacy. Specifically, in the findings of the study, Edwards-Joseph and Baker (2014) stated, “Many of the participants attributed their academic self-efficacy to their educational background. Coming from a British influenced school system for primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education was one factor participants felt influenced their academic self-efficacy” (p. 53). The majority of the narratives from the participants confirmed this and provided various perspectives on why they believed this was the case, including the discipline they acquired while living in the Caribbean.

### **Interactions with Professors**

Participants’ stories reveal a thought-provoking dichotomy on how university professors impacted their experience. Their relationships, perceptions, and connections to university professors unfolded in multiple ways during this study. When participants were asked about their academic experience, the word “professor” was the most widely used word to identify salient academic experiences. This was significant because there were no questions in the one-on-one interviews or focus group that specifically inquired about Caribbean student participants’ interactions with their professors. Yet participants shared experiences they had with their professors to underscore various aspects of their academic experiences. The majority of the participants admired their professors, outlining the ways their professors positively impacted their experiences. However, a few Caribbean student participants reported negative academic experiences as they relived their encounters with University professors who were not culturally responsive in their teaching and learning. The narratives that follow reveal the ways University professors

impacted the academic experiences of Caribbean student participants while they pursued their undergraduate studies.

### **Positive Experiences with University Professors**

Most of the participants of this study revealed having a positive experience with their professor when I asked about their academic experience. Mimi, who is alumna of Abraham College, immediately linked her professor to her academic experiences and revealed how she was strategic in her interactions with them. She had the following to share:

I think the professors at Abraham College was very good. I can't think of any professors that I had a negative experience with. Maybe that might just be a "me" thing. I had this mindset that I was spending all this money so I needed to get good grades so I can get into a good graduate school. So my strategy was to talk to all of my professors, they knew me by my first name. I always raised my hand in class so I can be an active participant. I never felt any negative vibes from the professors because they were always willing to help. It was a good experience. I may have been lucky because I avoided all of the bad professors.

Mimi associated her academic experiences with her experience with professors without me prompting. She referenced professors as we discussed various aspects of her academic experience, including the one philosophy class she had struggled with. She claimed, "My philosophy professor was really bad but I don't think there was no way to help that." Still, most of her experiences were positive and it became clear throughout the course of the interview that Mimi saw a successful academic experience as one that involves positive interactions with her professors. Other Caribbean student participants shared more personal stories around interactions with their professors when I asked about

their academic experience. For example, Nadia, who I referenced earlier in this chapter, shared the following story regarding her professor's instrumental role in getting her back on track academically. She stated:

You know I partied a lot and fortunately one of my professors really helped set me straight. I was missing a lot of classes. I wanted to be in TV and film and stuff like that, and I used to party all the time. I would go from the clubs directly to school. Like I was very Dominican because I wanted to be in my culture, dancing merengue with my Dominican friends all the time just because I miss my country. After class one day, one of my professors pulled me to the side and she's like, you know, you smell like liquor. I'm not sure if you took a shower this morning, but you smell like you just came from a party and I don't know if you're taking your schooling seriously, but I think you have a lot of potential and I think you need to think about your situation a little better. I think you can do much more than what you're doing now. My professor just told me to stop bullshitting, you know, just do my best. She really called me out on the things I was doing wrong. I looked up to her, because she was kind of cool and I liked her, so I started to get myself together.

I listened attentively to Nadia as she expressed her emotions through tears when telling this story. To Nadia, her professors were more than just content experts. She saw them as having the ability to change the course of a student's life. The above experience was a turning point in Nadia's life, and she recalled how grateful she was to have a professor who saw potential in her and was caring enough to take the time and have an honest conversation that eventually led to her getting back on track academically.

The caring nature of some professors allowed a few participants to further explore knowledge connected to their home island. Ramona, a first-year student from Haiti attending Pimenta State University, captured an example of this when she learned the perspective of one of her professors on the history of Haiti. She shared:

I had a professor who was good, and I learned about how my country became so poor. Haiti was the first country to get its independence and the United States made an example out of us [long pause]. You see, the United States and a lot of other countries were buying many of our products but when we got our independence, they stopped buying our products and then we became poor. Shortly after they decided to put someone in power who had close ties to the United States. The United Nations came to take care of us for a while and then they overthrow one of our presidents. Now, we didn't know how to take care of ourselves when they left us. We were like children. When you take care of a kid for a while and then you leave the kid by itself it is possible that the kid wouldn't know how to take care of themselves. Someone was supposed to be there to set an example, to teach us. But unfortunately, they just left us by ourselves. What the professor was saying made a lot of sense. There was big a chain reaction of things that follow, most of which was not good and it devastated my country.

As a critical researcher who is analyzing the academic experiences of Caribbean student participants through a postcolonial lens, I was drawn towards Ramona's story. Clearly, there are historical and postcolonial connections relating to the way her professor taught about the Caribbean region. She shared that this knowledge from her professor motivated and encouraged her to do additional research on the historical struggles that occurred in Haiti. She now has a more comprehensive understanding of what happened in Haiti during movements such as the Haitian revolution, a series of conflicts between 1791 and 1804 involving numerous parties including Haitian slaves, colonists, and the armies of the British and the French. She shared with me that she was proud of the fact that Haiti had become the first country to be founded by slaves after winning its independence. From a postcolonial lens, Ramona's narrative illuminates how historical events that have impacted the Caribbean region can influence the academic interest of Caribbean students studying in the United States.

## **Negative Experiences with University Professors**

While the narratives Caribbean student participants shared about their professors were mainly positive, it is worth acknowledging the narratives that were negative to provide a holistic view of the impact that professors had on participants' experiences. A few participants of this study mentioned ways they were negatively impacted by their professors when I asked them about their academic experience. Many of the negative narratives shared by Caribbean student participants revolved around the feeling of otherness (feeling different) or just the nature of having to interact with a professor who was not familiar with their background. Consetta, a senior attending Pimenta State University, shared the following negative experience she had with one of her professors:

There was one chemistry professor who I approached for a recommendation letter and he made me extremely uncomfortable. I don't want to say that Caribbean professors aren't professional, but they're a little bit easier going than American professors. I've always been more intimidated with the American professors. That professor asked me why I deserved the recommendation letter and made me more uncomfortable. And then when I spoke to a Caribbean professor about a recommendation letter, they were more welcoming and made me feel more at home. It was very casual when I came to the Caribbean professor's office. I just needed to have a brief conversation and she was like you got an A in my class last year so I would be happy to do the recommendation letter for you. But the chemistry professor from the United States who I also got an A in the class did not say that. It was a completely different experience.

While it was difficult to assess the nature of the relationship that Consetta had with both professors, there is much to glean from her comparison of U.S. and Caribbean professors, particularly when this is analyzed from the standpoint of feeling intimidated. This was

not commonly reported by other participants, but her claim is still worth highlighting because of the enormous impact such feelings can have on Caribbean students.

The nuances of languages (see Chapter V) re-emerged as Caribbean student participants linked their academic experiences with interactions they had with professors. Rena, who is a junior attending Pimenta State University, shared the following:

I had a professor who spoke Spanish to other students. This made it hard for me to focus in class. I mean it was very difficult because the professor would go from English to Spanish and I didn't understand a lot of what she was saying. I didn't want to stop her because it seems like everyone was understanding her except for me. I decided to go with the flow. Well, we already know the majority here are Cubans. We have way more Cubans than we have Americans or Europeans. So, the teachers are mainly from Cuba or the Dominican Republic or Spain. And when they see most of the students interacting in Spanish, they feel more comfortable teaching in Spanish with no regard to people like me who can't speak Spanish.

The fact that Pimenta State University is a Hispanic-serving institution impacted her experience. Furthermore, this challenge and experience was unique to non-Spanish speaking Caribbean student participants. Still, as discussed in the previous chapter, this has been an instrumental aspect of Caribbean student participants' experience. For Rena, this created an environment where she was around Caribbean students but did not feel connected academically because of her inability to understand the spoken language of the professor. Attention should be given to this dynamic as institutions work to create welcoming environments for Caribbean students.

While most participants commented about their professors when discussing their academic experiences, there was one participant from the largest school in this study (Pimenta State University) who expressed concerns about the overall size of the campus

when they shared about their academic experience. The following exchange with Doria captures this:

**Doria:** Well, first off I can say one of my biggest academic shocks was the size of the school. St. Maarten is only 37 square miles. Very, very, very small. It can probably fit into the United States a lot of times. So when I went to the school the first time I was shocked. I couldn't believe that this is what the school looked like. One of the difficulties that I had was finding my classes and I think any Caribbean person that comes here and goes to college the first time will have that challenge. I was late for a lot of my classes because I could not find them. I didn't understand the system, the system of how to understand the buildings. It was difficult for me to catch on.

**Hazael:** Okay. Thank you for sharing. So with this academic challenge, in terms of finding the class, how did you cope with that? How did you manage?

**Doria:** Honestly, I was very frustrated. There were times I used to come home and tell my mom I don't want to go back to school because I can't find where I have to go and that was very frustrating to me. I told her I was missing like half of these classes because I can't find the class and nobody is there to help me. I coped by seeing someone in my classes and following them to class.

I expected this narrative to be widely discussed by the Caribbean student participants but that was not the case. The population and size of the Caribbean islands are small in comparison to the United States. In fact, the population of the largest Caribbean islands will be smaller than most of states in the United States. As mentioned in Chapter IV, Doria also has a negative experience with a professor that was centered on race. Other academic concerns mentioned by Caribbean student participants were centered on the structure of exams. Specifically, Kennedy, a first-year aviation major at Jamestown University, mentioned his lack of familiarity with multiple choice exams because his home island of Bahamas often utilized an open-ended approach for exams. Kennedy shared, "I needed to get used to this multiple-choice exam thing. The downside is you

never get partial credit because the answer is either correct or wrong...In the Bahamas, we have open-ended questions with opportunities for partial credit.” Similarly, Mimi, who attended Abraham College, discussed, “Most of my exams were essay base back home in Jamaica whereas in the United States, I am having multiple choice and having to fill in the blank true and false questions.” While these academic concerns were not mentioned by other participants, it highlights an important consideration in the academic experiences of Caribbean student participants.

The academic experiences of the Caribbean student participants were nuanced. Based on the narratives, the participants believed that their educational background and the discipline they acquired in the Caribbean greatly contributed to their academic success. To underscore this point, participants stressed the demanding nature of schools in the Caribbean, which according to the participants mandates intense studying and higher-than-normal homework and class assignments. Also, regarding their academic experiences, participants commented on the size of the campus, the ways exams were structured differently, and the perceived impact of online materials. University professors mainly positively impacted their academic experiences although there were a few negative encounters. It was rather striking that the participants decided to share these narratives about their professors without me prompting. This sub-theme reveals that professors play an integral part in the experiences of Caribbean students and all professors should make an effort to be aware of the impact they could have on their experiences.

## **Cultural Experiences of Caribbean Student Participants**

I used the broad definition of culture by Mironenko and Soronkin (2018) to engage Caribbean student participants around their cultural experiences during their undergraduate studies. Mironenko and Soronkin (2018) state that one can associate their culture to material objects (e.g., artifacts, ranging from planetary scale to jewelry), spiritual and non-material components (e.g., religion, language, literature, art, science, etc.), and social aspects relating to constantly emerging and changing customs and traditions (p. 338). I wanted to learn the ways in which the Caribbean student participants navigated being exposed to a new culture while pursuing their undergraduate studies. The stories and narratives shared by Caribbean student participants reveal that they focused on food and their Caribbean accent. Specifically, many participants acknowledged that they missed Caribbean food and that their Caribbean accent created challenges for them. Those participants who did not reference food and their Caribbean accent shared about challenges with weather, having to move from year-round tropical climate to dealing with winter months. In the sections that follow, I report what Caribbean student participants shared regarding their cultural experiences under the subthemes of food and Caribbean accent.

### **Food: Lack of Authentic Caribbean Cuisine**

Narratives about food dominated conversations with Caribbean student participants when I asked them about their cultural experience. In the Caribbean islands, there are multiple cooking styles that are accompanied by local ingredients. In most cases, these cooking styles are unique to each Caribbean island. Signature cooking dishes

in the Caribbean include the jerk Chicken dish in Jamaica, cou cou and flying fish dish in Barbados, and the famous Doubles in Trinidad. The lack of access to authentic Caribbean cuisine had a negative impact on the cultural experiences of Caribbean student participants as they navigated their undergraduate experiences. Mimi, who is from Jamaica and has been living in the United States for six years, immediately gravitated towards her struggles with food when I asked about her cultural experience. She stated:

The food here is very different. The food was edible, but it wasn't what I was used to. The dining hall did not have really good food. I remember one time I heard from others that the dining hall was serving Jamaican jerk chicken and fried plantain for dinner. I got excited about it. When I experienced the food, it didn't taste like the jerk chicken and fried plantain that I was used to having back home in Jamaica. Honestly, I thought that was the ultimate disrespect to my culture. I mean they had rice and peas with curry on top of it and they said it is Caribbean. How do you make regular rice and peas and just pour curry sauce on top of it and then say it is Caribbean jerk chicken? [long pause]

There was a long pause as Mimi waited to hear my response and reactions to her above experience and question. I nodded my head to show disappointment to what she had experienced. Mimi discussed her continuous cravings for Caribbean food which was not readily available during her undergraduate studies. Mimi felt disrespected because the dining hall staff at Abraham College did not prepare the Jamaica jerk chicken in the manner that she was used to growing up.

Rachel, who is from the Bahamas and has been living in the United States for four years, also shared sentiments around food when I inquired about her cultural experience. During the one-on-one interview, Rachel acknowledged the differences between the Caribbean food she was used to eating growing up in the Bahamas and the U.S. food she

had experienced during her time in the United States. She claimed, “As much as I like food, it was difficult not having the food that I am used to having in the Bahamas.” While discussing her cultural experiences, Rachel referenced peas and rice and other fresh seafood such as conch, which is popular in the Bahamas. Although Rachel attended college in a city that has a high population of Caribbean residents, she still struggled with not being able to have the authentic Bahamian cuisine that she had enjoyed during her time growing up in the Caribbean.

As Caribbean student participants shared narratives around food, they recalled what they were willing to do to have access to authentic Caribbean food. Luiz, who is from Puerto Rico, claimed that food influenced his move to a city where there was more access to Caribbean cuisine. Luiz’s dream was to join the U.S. military, so he attended a military college in the northeast United States. He did not take a liking to the city in the northeast United States where he attended military college and the lack of Caribbean food was one of the reasons he cited for his dislike of the city. This was a big point of concern for Luiz who eventually decided to move away from the city and continue his studies in a more diverse city where he could more readily access Puerto Rican food. Luiz shared the following about his move:

I wanted to get back to my roots, you know, my Latino roots. I started looking for schools and everything and then I found out about Pimenta State University has a very strong international presence. The city is very diverse, so I decided that's where I want to go as I started to think about Puerto-Rican food and my rice and beans. I have been able to get some of that since I have been here.

While he appreciated his time in that northern city, he acknowledged it lacked a multicultural presence. While there were additional factors that influenced his move to this more diverse city, it is worth noting that Luiz cited food as one of main factors that contributed to his move. Upon his arrival at Pimenta State University, Luiz shared his experience indulging in the Puerto Rican food.

A search for Caribbean food reveals much literature, studies, and blogs on the uniqueness of Caribbean cuisine. Historically, the literature points to the ways in which the Europeans influenced Caribbean food during the colonial struggles of the European powers since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Morgan (2003) shared the Spanish, Dutch, British, and French settlers contributed and influenced Caribbean cuisine throughout the years. This study reveals that food played an integral role in the cultural experiences of Caribbean student participants. The participants of this study, having been raised in the Caribbean, were used to Caribbean cooking and had difficulty finding the same Caribbean cuisine in the United States. The narratives and stories shared by these participants needs attention from scholars and researchers interested in their experiences. Given this aspect was not a major focus of this study, more research is needed to determine the extent to which food impacts the overall experiences of Caribbean students as they transition to the United States for higher education studies.

### **Caribbean Accent**

The ability to effectively communicate in English is imperative at most institutions of higher education in the United States. In reviewing the data, there was much consistency regarding the ways foreign accent impacted the cultural experiences of

the Caribbean student participants. Whether participants were from an English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, or French-speaking Caribbean island and regardless of the region of the United States they attended school, their Caribbean accent played a significant role in their cultural experiences, and more specifically, in the interactions they had with peers, faculty, staff, and administrators. The Caribbean does not have a homogenous accent. In fact, the Caribbean accent differs based on the language and histories of the specific island. Still, one could argue that there are many similarities in the dialects spoken throughout the Caribbean. There is some research that discusses the impact of foreign accent on students' experiences (see Caffarra, Michell, & Martin 2018; Foucart, Santamaria-Garcia, & Hartsuiker 2019), but there is no research that looks specifically at the impact of foreign accent on Caribbean students' experiences while they attend institutions of higher education in the United States. The narratives shared by Caribbean student participants in this study provide some perspectives on this.

Richard, a sophomore attending Jamestown University, was quick to share about his Caribbean accent when I inquired about his cultural experience at Jamestown University. He stated, "The Caribbean accent is unique, and I feel like I stand out from everyone else when I speak." In referring to his Bahamian accent, Richard shared that his Caribbean accent gave him a lot of unwanted attention from peers, faculty, and University administrators. While British English is the first language of the Bahamas, their dialect is influenced by various African languages (Nassau Island, 2019). What was most annoying to Richard was having to repeat himself because others did not understand what he was saying or because they believed that he had a "cool accent." Richard pointed

to the location of Jamestown University not being very diverse which may have contributed to individuals not being used to having someone speak with a Caribbean accent.

Most Caribbean student participants believed their foreign accent labelled them as “other” and created a myriad of challenges as they navigated their undergraduate experience. In asking these participants about their cultural experience, it was common for them to share similar versions of the experience that Richard mentioned above. For example, Mimi who had attended Abraham College, had the following to say when I inquired about her cultural experiences:

The language was a big thing but not because I can't speak English. The thing that probably has been more of an issue is my Caribbean accent. I mean they know that you're not from the United States when you speak. There are a lot of people that did not understand what I was saying to them. It was bad when I first arrived in the United States as I was trying to fit-in. Some people think that you're just dumb for speaking broken English. In the Caribbean, we use phrases that are not used in the United States. I mean maybe I should not use them, but I am so used to it. It is part of me. I mean I grow talking like that so it is hard to give that up.

Mimi shared stories on how her foreign accent impacted her cultural experience. Her suggestion of not using her Caribbean dialect was concerning and tells the shift that many of the Caribbean student participants contemplated as they grappled with their Caribbean accent in a new environment. At various points during the interview, Mimi directed questions to me to inquire how I navigated my undergraduate experiences since I, too, have a Caribbean accent. Because I did not want to influence her response, I refrained from sharing my personal stories with Caribbean accent and simply acknowledged that it

was a challenge for me as well. However, in reflecting, I believe Mimi was seeking some sort of relational response from me and perhaps it would have benefited our interactions. At a minimum, I could have shared more after the interview was over. In the final chapter, I address the type of push-pull tension that I experienced as I aimed to maintain the neutrality of my research while being self-reflexive.

There were some Caribbean student participants who felt targeted by others because of their Caribbean accent. For example, Damian, who attends Jamestown University, shared about comments directed at him that made him feel uncomfortable. While talking to a friend from the Bahamas in the hallway of an administrative building at Jamestown University, Damian claimed that a University administrator walking towards him commented, “you should learn how to speak like everyone else.” Personally, I was upset by this comment and unlike other disturbing stories with participants that I successfully concealed with a straight face, I let my emotions show by nodding my head in disgust. Damian referenced that this was shared in a joking manner, but to him, it was no joke. He explained that this experience happened only a few weeks after arriving in the United States. Damian was bothered that a university administrator would make such a joke. He spent time explaining the encounter during the interview and mentioned his extreme disappointment for what I saw as a lack of cultural awareness on the part of a University administrator.

As the Caribbean student participants illuminated the cultural nuances of their accent, they often disclosed phrases and terminology in the Caribbean that were not familiar to those they interacted with while they pursued their undergraduate studies. For

example, a few of the participants briefly mentioned the cultural tradition in the Caribbean of saying “Good Morning” when you first see someone to start the day or “Good Night” as a greeting to someone you see in the evening. I smiled heavily whenever participants referenced this as I know first-hand how these cultural traits are embedded in those who were born and raised in the Caribbean. Upon arriving to the United States, the Caribbean student participants quickly realized that these cultural traditions were not practiced here, and as such, refrained from that tradition. Kim, a Caribbean student from the island of Antigua, recalled the following experience that illuminates this cultural challenge:

I remember two of my American friends came over to my room and we were sitting on the same couch and I said “dress down.” She looked at me completely clueless. I didn’t immediately come to me that I was using a Caribbean slang. My friends thought I was talking about something completely different. She said, what? I had to explain that “dress down” means to slightly move down on the couch that we were sitting on.

According to Kim, these experiences continuously reminded her of the cultural differences between the Caribbean and the United States. She had to adjust and be mindful that her U.S. friends were not fully aware of some of the slangs and terms she was familiar with growing up in the Caribbean. Hence, Kim and other Caribbean student participants who experienced this dynamic often felt they could not bring their authentic selves to various spaces at their respective institution.

Caribbean student participants came up with diversified strategies to successfully navigate the challenges they experienced because of their Caribbean accent and culture.

One of the core strategies revealed by Caribbean student participants around navigating these challenges was this idea of “refining their accent” to be able to blend into their educational environment. Most Caribbean student participants shared they had to change the way they spoke so they could appropriately fit in to their environments. Doria, who attends Pimenta State University, captures this in the following statement:

I had to refine my accent because it is important for survival. I'm able to switch it. I can go like real St. Maarten, and then I'm able to refine it so people can understand me. One of the issues I had was when I started school was people weren't able to understand me well because my accent was so strong and the things that we would say back in St. Maarten, they don't say it here. So the things that I was talking about was very hard for people to understand and then I would have issues where they used to bully me about my accent. I had people make fun of how I speak, and I didn't like it. I was embarrassed a lot of times. So I just refined the accent to make it easier. It makes it easier for other people to understand me.

As she continued sharing her story, Doria claimed that she was bullied at Pimenta State University because of her Caribbean accent. This was a tense moment during the interview as Doria became very serious. I listened attentively and let her know that I was sorry she experienced this. Other Caribbean student participants did not share being bullied but many alluded to the negative impact of these experiences. Doria revealed that she consulted her mother when she started refining her accent. Specifically, she stated:

I told my mom I don't understand how people could be so mean to other people. I couldn't understand. I cried and I cried, and it was very sad, but I was like, you know what, it doesn't matter.

This underscores the negative impact that this had on Doria's experiences as she pursued her studies at Pimenta State University. Still, Doria mentioned how she continued to stay positive as she navigated her experiences. The concern of Caribbean accent came up in a focus group discussion at Jamestown University with Damian, Richard, and Kennedy. Unlike the interview with Doria, the focus group had much humor whenever they discussed the challenges they experienced with their Caribbean accent. Kennedy, who is a first-year student at Jamestown University, steered the discussion towards refining his accent as a form of code switching. Fortunately for Damian, Richard, and Kennedy, they had each other and mentioned the benefits of having a network of students from the same island attending the same institution. To them, they knew they could always be themselves when they were around each other.

While the discussions around the cultural experiences of Caribbean student participants were dominated by food and the Caribbean accent, weather came up for the participants who attended institutions of higher education in the northeast United States. Mimi and Kerry, who attended Abraham College and Thomas and Rolls College respectively, referenced the weather as a cultural challenge. Both institutions are located in the same state (two hours apart) and it is known for its cold winters. Mimi recalled the following when I inquired about her cultural experience at Abraham College:

The first cultural thing that pops up in my head is the weather. I mean the weather in Roseau [pseudonym] is very cold in comparison to what I experienced in Jamaica. The weather was the first big cultural shocker when I first arrived here in the United States.

Mimi shared how she had to get used to winter clothing and how she had never worn a winter jacket before moving to the United States. I could not help but share the story with Mimi of when I first moved to North Carolina. It was late October with temperatures in the 40s and I was wearing a t-shirt and jeans because I was oblivious as to what 40 degree weather felt like. Kerry remembered having similar struggles with the weather when she first arrived in the United States and remembered when she tried “to avoid outdoors” during the winter months.

Food, Caribbean accent, and the weather impacted the cultural experiences of the Caribbean student participants. In a recent seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Carina Brossy shared, “Food is essential to human survival, but its functionality is far more complex. Food serves as a window into societal values, perceptions of self, economics, history and more” (World View Seminar, 2018). Indeed, when I first moved to the United States from the Caribbean, I recall how food brought back positive memories and images of my home. Hence, I can see why so many participants of this study reported that a lack of access to Caribbean food was a challenging cultural experience. The Caribbean accent served as a reminder to participants of their otherness as they interacted with peers and university administrators. There is some research on the impact of foreign accent on people’s experiences in a foreign country, but no specific research that connects to Caribbean students. Hence, further research and inquiries are needed to determine how the Caribbean accent impact the experiences of Caribbean students. The temperatures in the Caribbean are steady year-round, and the participants who attended institutions of higher education in the

northeast United States, where winters are cold, saw this as a cultural challenge. Taken together, the Caribbean student participants of this study experienced cultural challenges, but were able to successfully navigate them as they pursued their undergraduate studies.

### **Social Experiences of Caribbean Student Participants**

During the one-on-one interviews and focus group, I sought to learn about the social experiences of Caribbean student participants by asking how their social life at their undergraduate institutions compared to their social life in the Caribbean and the challenges and successes they experienced socially. My intent was to explore the ways participants navigated their social dynamics at their undergraduate institution. To maintain consistency and provide clarity to participants around what I meant by social experiences, I associated the term “social experiences” to interpersonal relationship or one’s ability to form a connection with others. Narratives around friendship dominated what Caribbean student participants had to say about their social experiences. Most Caribbean student participants reported challenges with making friends and connecting with others who were not from the Caribbean region. The narratives that follow portray what Caribbean student participants revealed about their social experiences as they pursued their undergraduate studies.

#### **Difficulty Making Friends with Non-International Students**

The main finding regarding Caribbean student participants’ social experiences was the difficulty they experienced making friends with domestic peers or those who had little knowledge of their upbringing. This was the case for immigrant and nonimmigrant Caribbean students. In listening to their narratives, it appears that most Caribbean student

participants wanted to make friends with their peers from the United States during their undergraduate studies. However, participants acknowledged it was difficult to do so. As participants shared more about this challenge, the complexities around this were revealed. Wendy, who is a junior attending Pimenta State University, shared about her difficulty making friends when I asked about her social experience. She states:

Making friends with Americans was hard. I came from a small town in the Dominican Republic where everyone knows everyone, so it was easy to make friends back home. And even if you don't know someone, there is someone you know that knows that person. In the United States and at Pimenta State University, it's kind of hard because people are just minding their own business. They are doing their own thing and I feel no one goes that extra mile to get to know people. Students go to class and when class is over, they get up and leave.

While this was shared within the context of friendship, there are additional dynamics at play, including cultural differences between the ways people interact and socialize in the Dominican Republic as opposed to the United States. Wendy underscored this in her narrative by pointing to how students at Pimenta State University “just mind their own business” whereas in the Dominican Republic there is a sense of community because of the island’s size. These cultural differences then create a social barrier when students from the Caribbean transition to the United States to pursue their undergraduate. Other Caribbean students shared similar sentiments. Specifically, some participants claimed that the town they hailed from only had a few hundred people, making their undergraduate institution feel like a big city. The implications of this were severe, particularly from a social standpoint. Wendy stated, “I fell into a depressive stage of mind, spending most of my time in my dorm room sleeping and eating at random times.”

Here, we see how one aspect of a Caribbean student social experience may have impacted other aspects of her well-being.

According to Caribbean student participants, navigating their social life took a lot of effort as they transitioned to a new environment and educational institution. A close look at their stories reveal that friendship played a role in this. A few participants sometimes had to change important aspects of themselves as they attempted to make friends. Some of the narratives around codeswitching that were echoed as participants navigated their cultural experiences were also shared when they discussed their social experiences. Perhaps this is because cultural and social are so intertwined for Caribbean students in a way that might be distinct from U.S. students adjusting to social norms/practices of a university. Jenny, who is from Cuba and had been living in the United States for four years, stressed her efforts to connect with others and make friends.

She states:

It took me a while to get adjusted because Cuba was more of a social place. It was easy to make connections in my town. I mean I could become part of a group with little effort. But here in the United States it is not like that. It took a lot of energy for me to get to know people. It's like everybody is on their own and you only interact if you need the other person.

This is worth highlighting because most Caribbean student participants could easily connect with others and make friends in the Caribbean. Jenny's claim regarding everybody being on their own connects with Wendy's narratives and this was a common assessment among other Caribbean students who participated in the study. The sense of community that exists in the Caribbean where students are able to easily connect with

others was disrupted upon arrival to the United States, making it challenging to make friends with their American peers because of various social and cultural reasons.

### **Making Friends with Caribbean and Other International Students**

Caribbean student participants did not struggle to make friends with Caribbean or other international students. A thorough review of the stories of the Caribbean student participants revealed that because of the challenges of connecting with others who were born and raised in the United States, they gravitated towards familiar territory to ease their social transition to a new educational institution. Hence, participants gravitated towards other Caribbean and international students. Luiz, who was born in Puerto Rico and attends Pimenta State University, underscored this when discussing his social experience:

The challenges socially was making friends and trying to connect with people you can't connect with. So, I really just made friends with international students. My very close friends were all international and that has always been the case. When I was in Pennsylvania, I had a very close group of four friends and two of them were from the Middle East and one was from Spain. I always had very close international friends. I know it is harder to have Americans friends because our cultures are so different.

Luiz's comments demonstrated how he naturally connected with other international students through a common interest. Even more telling is the fact that Luiz is a U.S. citizen because he is from Puerto Ricans but still does not gravitate towards those who were born in the United States. Kelly, who is also from Puerto Rico and attends Pimenta State University, also shared something similar and claimed that, "most of my friends were Puerto Ricans and a few Cubans." Both Kelly and Luiz believed the cultural

differences between the Caribbean and the United States may be the underlying factor that has made connecting socially and making friends with American students difficult for him. This was mentioned by a few participants, which further influenced their decision to connect with other international and Caribbean students. Ramona, who is from Jamaica and attends Pimenta State University, had the following to say when I asked about her social experiences:

Socially it was a challenge. Most of my close friends are also Jamaicans and that just happened naturally. I mean I have talked to some Haitian people and others from like the Virgin Islands. But for the most part my friends are mainly from Jamaica. I enjoyed staying in touch with people. At Pimenta State University, I mainly get involved with the Black Caribbean student events, and I am drawn towards activities where there are a lot of international students.

Given the experiences of Black Caribbean student participants of this study (see Chapter IV), it is no surprise that she closely affiliated with the Black student events. Ramona pointing out that she gravitated towards clubs and organizations that were mainly Caribbean in nature is important to acknowledge because it was a critical point of connection for friendship development among the Caribbean student participants. In situations where there was not a Caribbean or international student club or organization, participants were motivated and eager to start one. For example, a few weeks after conducting a focus group with Damian, Richard, and Kennedy (all international students on F-1 visas) at Jamestown University, I received a follow-up text messages via WhatsApp from Damian claiming he was petitioning to start an International Student organization on their campus in an effort to connect with more international students on

his campus. Damian wanted me to travel back to Jamestown University to talk to students and staff about the importance of starting an international student organization based on what I was learning from my research. This further supports the narratives among other Caribbean student participants around their preference to connect with other Caribbean and international students as they pursued their undergraduate studies.

There is much to glean from the social experiences of Caribbean student participants. An important observation in reviewing the narratives around participants' social experiences was the connection they made to friendship and their ability to make friends. The participants made these connections without me prompting. In sharing about friendship, participants revealed the difficulty they had connecting with peers who were from the United States in comparison to peers who were Caribbean or other international students. This narrative was consistent among participants from all Caribbean islands regardless of the institution they attended. Hence, the social experiences of Caribbean student participants involved close connections with others from their home country or other international students. Furthermore, there were important cultural connections within the social experience of the Caribbean student participants. A few participants reported that the cultural differences between the Caribbean and the United States was a contributing factor to their inability to connect with those who were born and raised in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

As students matriculate through college, they need support around various facets of their college experience. As a prerequisite to this, staff must be aware of the unique

experiences of all students. This study explored Caribbean student participants' academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States. Regarding their academic experiences, the participants reported that their educational background and the discipline they acquired growing up in the Caribbean were instrumental factors in their ability to successfully navigate their academic experiences. Also revealed within their academic experiences was the significant role of professors. Culturally, participants reported the ways a lack of authentic Caribbean food, changes in weather for those attending institutions in the northeast United States, and their Caribbean accent impacted their experiences. Finally, participants connected their social experiences to friendship, and they reported the successes and challenges around this.

The findings around the academic, cultural, and social experiences of the participants were surprising to me because there were no differences in these experiences based on the participants' immigration status. As previously stated, nine of the 18 participants of this study were international students. I intentionally made this selection to see if there would be differences in their experiences. There was no impact based on the immigration status of the participants. On the other hand, institution type had an impact on the participants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands when considering their cultural experiences. Pimenta State University is a Hispanic serving institution, giving the students from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean an advantage because of their abilities to more closely relate to faculty, staff, and administrators who were connected to their culture.

## CHAPTER VII

### FINAL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

The stories of the 18 participants in this study describe how their Caribbean identities, upbringings, and values impact aspects of their undergraduate experience. By utilizing postcolonial theory as a theoretical lens to analyze their stories, this study offers a new perspective for understanding and learning about Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States. This perspective is important because, “As higher education institutions progressively move towards internationalizing campuses, it is imperative that the academic literature reflects more diverse backgrounds and experiences” (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014, p. 612). While progress has been made towards achieving this, more work is needed if college campuses are to become inclusive environments for Caribbean students. Because there has not been extensive research on Caribbean students attending institutions of higher education in the United States, the analysis shared in this final chapter may provide thought-provoking discussions from which to make meaning of their experiences.

From a social justice standpoint, the results of this study are significant for all educators who are seeking to disrupt the traditional academic, cultural, racial, and social narratives surrounding Caribbean students. The viewpoints that emerged from the Caribbean student participants’ experiences could lead to better support and advocacy for them as they begin their higher education journeys in the United States. In this final

chapter, I start by revisiting my theoretical framework to share postcolonial connections to my participants' stories. Then, I discuss the conclusions that addressed my research questions and share the implications for research and practice in separate sections. Finally, I end with a brief reflective section that outlines what it has meant to me to do this work as someone who was born and raised in the Caribbean. The following research questions framed the development of this study:

Question 1: In what ways does race affect the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 2: What are the differences and commonalities in the experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States?

Question 3: In what ways do Caribbean students navigate their academic, cultural, and social experiences at institutions of higher education in the U.S. that might enable an improved understanding of their experiences?

### **Postcolonial Connections to Caribbean Student Participants' Narratives**

Postcolonial theory was the theoretical framework used to analyze the experiences of the 18 Caribbean student participants of this study. In the *Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) claim they use the term postcolonial to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day (p. 2). Hence, a postcolonial framework was applicable to the participants' narrative since they were all born and raised in the Caribbean, an archipelago of Western colonization. Participants from this study represented nine Caribbean islands, which were once or are now Dutch, English, French, and Spanish colonies. The Caribbean was first colonized by Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but several competing European powers took

control of various Caribbean islands in the centuries that followed (Lambert, 2017). In discussing their experiences, some participants made both direct and indirect connections to the colonial history of their island, and in some cases, they revealed the implications it had on their lived experiences. In the three subsections that follow, I illuminate what I call “postcolonial connections” in the participants’ narratives as they shared about their undergraduate experiences.

### **Postcolonial Connection: Existence of European Structures**

An obvious postcolonial connection is that European powers are still very much present in the Caribbean today. Two of the islands where participants are from, Puerto Rico and St. Maarten, are currently under colonial rule. While the other Caribbean islands are not under colonial rule, many islands continue to model their educational systems based on structures established by their former colonizers. Some participants referenced these educational systems when discussing certain aspects of their experiences. For example, most participants talked about their academic success and gave credit to the Caribbean education system (see Chapter VI), which is modeled after former European colonizers. As I reflect on the link participants made between their academic access and the education system on their Caribbean island, I am reminded by postcolonial theorist Kwok (2005) that, “Postcolonial intellectuals need to be vigilant about the deep-seated layers of colonialist patterns of thinking in the archaeological excavation of their mind” (p. 3). Therefore, as a critical researcher using a postcolonial lens to analyze their stories, I am in search of counter-narratives that illuminates what else might be an explanation for the students’ educational strength other than the colonial education system.

To start, I acknowledge that there are limited higher education institutions on the Caribbean islands where the participants were born and raised. As a result, many of the Caribbean student participants of this study had no options but to migrate to the United States to pursue their education. From a postcolonial standpoint, I wonder about the extent to which colonies attempted to shatter educational barriers by working to establish institutions of higher education on the islands. Doria, who is from St. Maarten, touched on the challenges of attaining higher education on that island. She explained:

So I am from the Dutch side of the island. Normally how it works on the Dutch side is you would get an opportunity to go to Holland for higher education. On the French side of the island (St. Martin), you either go to Guadeloupe or France for higher education. The problem is that it is not free and your parents would have to pay it back. It is much like a loan. And then you have the distance...

The island of St. Maarten is divided between two colonies, the Dutch and the French. I know from my time studying Caribbean history as a high school student in Dominica that both the French and the Dutch refused to relinquish power of the island after numerous battles. The 1648 treaty of Concordia was signed claiming, "The French shall continue in that quarter where they are established at this present, and... they shall inhabit the entire coast which faces Anguilla and the Dutch shall have the quarter of the fort, and the soil surrounding it on the south coast" (History of St. Maarten, 2018, p.1). The treaty was, and continues to be, complex and controversial for the inhabitants of St. Maarten because of the way it distorts the experiences and opportunities and engraves a sense of dependence and inferiority.

Meanwhile, we see from this brief narrative from Doria how this treaty impacted her possibilities and options for higher education. Postcolonial theory provides a unique lens to make meaning of Doria's story. Childs and Williams (1997) state, "In the period after decolonization, it rapidly became apparent that although colonial armies and bureaucracies might have withdrawn, Western powers were still intent on maintaining maximum indirect control over erstwhile colonies, via political, cultural, and above-all economic channels, a phenomenon which became known today as neocolonialism" (p. 5). While a deep analysis of neocolonialism is beyond the scope of this section, the fact that Doria had to explore higher education elsewhere underpins the nature of dependence that serves as a foundation in a neocolonial world. In Doria's case, proximity and finances served as dependent factors. She contemplated travelling to Holland but then realized, "It was too far and I didn't want to be away from my family." It is important that such structures be highlighted when interpreting student voices who were born and raised in countries that are now, or once were colonies of other countries.

### **Postcolonial Connection: Maintaining Culture**

Another postcolonial connection was centered on participants' desire to maintain their culture while they navigated a new country and institution. This occurred with participants from both islands that are former colonies and currently under colonial rule. Kelly and Luiz, who are both from Puerto Rico and attend Pimenta State University, shared examples of this. Luiz recalled how he transferred from an institution in the northeast United States to Pimenta State University, a Hispanic-serving institution, because he wanted to "get back to his roots." While he appreciated his time in a

traditional northern city, he acknowledged it lacked a multicultural presence. Luiz often reminisced about the food in Puerto Rico that he had enjoyed so much as a kid and detested having to eat “American food” so frequently. Kelly shared how her family successfully kept American culture from “invading too much.” She described her sense of an encroaching American culture through a useful specific example:

What impacted my cultural experience the most was the lack of ability to express my culture. I remember international Heritage Day at Pimenta State University. It was the one day where I could bring my own flag to school. I had this really big Puerto Rican flag in my closet, so I brought it with me, and tied it around my neck because that's one of the things we do in Puerto Rico. It's considered a celebratory thing from when we declared our independence from Spain...almost like the American flag on the fourth of July. Well, one of the security people at Pimenta State University got really mad at me and they were like, what are you doing? And I'm like, I'm wearing my flag. And they're like, oh, you can't do that, that's disrespectful. I had to say that I'm sorry, but this is my culture. It's kind of this sense of being proud of my island and our heritage. Long story short, my friends were also kind of backing me up because they're Cuban and Venezuelan and they have similar cultural routines

In analyzing the incident shared by Kelly, I am reminded of Childs and Williams' (1997) assertion that an important aspect of postcolonial theory is, “resistance to Western control” (p. 26). Kelly revealed how upset she was from this experience. She was trying to preserve her culture while in a new culture and new country. In Kelly's story there was an authority figure imposing on her a U.S.-centric response to how flags should be treated. She is resisting that, and insisting that she celebrates her pride in culture. Both Kelly and Luiz's stories get at the complex relationship that can exist between a Caribbean student and the host country that is centered on culture, particularly when the Caribbean island was once, or are now, a colony of the host country.

In this study, additional examples emerged where participants struggled to maintain their culture. This was particularly prevalent when the Caribbean student participants discussed their Caribbean accent. In this study, most Caribbean student participants believed their foreign accent labelled them as “other” and created a myriad of challenges as they navigated their undergraduate experience. While many of the participants were able to successfully navigate the challenges presented by their accent, it is important to consider how such a dynamic negatively impact their experiences at institutions of higher education. For example, a few participants reported how they did not feel they could be authentic in their academic environments, promoting a sense of insecurity among these participants, which led them to explore code-switching as a coping mechanism. While code-switching may be a needed strategy for working through traditional institutions of power, it has negative consequences such as hindering students from bringing their authentic selves in certain spaces.

### **Postcolonial Connection: Continued Forms of Colonization**

The final postcolonial connection was around Caribbean student participants’ need for financial support and assistance, a core theme in this study. Data from this study revealed that most Caribbean student participants (immigrants and nonimmigrants) could not have attended a higher education institution in the United States without scholarships or other forms of financial assistance. This finding is significant because the literature on international students claims that colleges and universities are engaged in recruiting them as a source of revenue without providing the necessary support (Alfatel, 2016). In most instances, international student tuition is the highest of any student attending a college or

university in the United States. From a postcolonial perspective, I am inclined to ask: Are higher education institutions implementing a continued form of colonization, whereby they rely on and exploit the full tuition of international students who pursue their education in the United States? Loomba (2015) offers context to account for modern colonialism which could provide a foundation to answer this question. She states:

Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods, and wealth from the countries that it conquered- it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into complex relationships with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries...In whichever direction human beings and materials travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called mother country. (p. 21)

There is much to glean from Lomba's (2015) analysis when it is considered in light of the literature on international students and the data from this study. For example, if the nine Caribbean student participants from this study who were also international students decide to stay in the United States where they obtained their education, the cultural capital attained by these students may not benefit their home island. Researchers who are interested in studying students from countries that were once, or are now, colonies of other countries should think critically about the motives of the country and institutions international students attend. Fortunately, some scholars have already started to do this. For example, Choudaha (2016) recently claimed:

It's high time to stop treating international students as cash cows and embrace the values which institutions expect their students to manifest. To build a sustainable and an inclusive model of enrolling and integrating international students with local students and campus communities, institutions of higher education must invest in campus readiness. (p. 3)

With that in mind, I recommend that U.S. institutions explore ways to support (or continue supporting) international students financially in their higher education journey in the United States. I address some basic steps that could be taken to around this in the implications for research and practice sections of this chapter.

Postcolonial theory has much to offer when analyzing the experiences of the Caribbean student participants of this study. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said advocated to “criticize much contemporary theory because of its detachment from the problems and constraints of the real world” (as cited in Kennedy, 2000, p. 3). This is what participants of this study did when I asked them to provide recommendations to institutions of higher education in terms of how to better support Caribbean students. The students’ descriptions and narratives remind all at institutions of higher education to check their assumptions as they aim to globalize their campuses and attract more Caribbean students. Kerry’s response holistically captures what many other participants had to say. She explained:

The best recommendation for schools recruiting Caribbean students is to make sure that everything is sorted out for us. They should know that the same way they are making a sacrifice to sponsor the I-20 and all of that, we Caribbean students are making a sacrifice too. So, when we come to America, it is the universities’ responsibility to make sure we have things like housing for break holidays figured out. Like we need to know where we are going during the break...Because when these schools talk on the press and all of that, they are bragging and saying that they have x number of international students and that is a good thing. But they need to help us too. It should not just be about using our name and our presence. Instead it should be about what are you giving us. Make sure we have a solid and steady income because every college student needs money. I also feel like them

providing a little bit of back home here is needed. We need more events that we could relate to and more things that we could go to.

Embedded within Kerry's recommendations was the assertion that international students should be supported and not exploited, a narrative that complements the thinking of postcolonial theorist Edward Said. Indeed, an inclusive environment for Caribbean students goes beyond institutions of higher education simply reporting the number of international students. Support mechanisms centered on scholarship and financial aid, housing, and cultural events that connect them to their home countries are all vital components needed to create inclusive environments for Caribbean and other international students.

Postcolonial theory is a term used to identify several branches of research undertaken by those interested in the development of national and group identities and intergroup relations within geographical areas once dominated by colonial powers (Gresson III, 2008, p. 130). Given the Caribbean's colonization history, I used postcolonial theory in this study as the theoretical framework. A total of 9 Caribbean islands were represented in this study. Postcolonial theory provided a unique perspective from which to illuminate the stories of Caribbean student participants, and there were postcolonial connections in their stories that were focused on the existence of European structures, maintaining culture, and what I claim to be a continued form of colonization. Each of these subthemes brings a unique perspective regarding the ways Caribbean student participants navigated their experiences.

## **Discussion of Findings**

The present study used individual interviews and a focus group to explore Caribbean students' experiences at four institutions of higher education in the United States. The results of the study both reiterate and contradict what has been reported in the literature. While Caribbean student participants of this study were resilient and demonstrated great courage, the stories they shared revealed they needed assistance and guidance academically, culturally, and socially. Of similar importance within the data is the need for institutions of higher education to be aware of the ways race impacts their experiences and respond to this awareness by providing the necessary resources and trainings to those who work with Caribbean students. The diverse make-up of the institution, location of the institution, and the Caribbean island where students were born and raised are all factors to be considered in determining the appropriate resources that could be shared with Caribbean students. In the sections that follow, I discuss the research question findings and provide further analysis and interpretation around the data shared in Chapters IV, V, and VI.

### **Race and Caribbean Students**

Caribbean student participant's experiences with race was a primary focus of this study. There is some research that looks at the experiences of Caribbean students as it relates to race (see Blake, 2006; Constantine et al., 2005; Denton & Massey, 1989; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Manyika, 2001). The participants of this study were racially diverse; specifically, they identified as Black (eleven participants), Hispanic (five participants), and Mixed-race (two participants). The data gathered from this study

suggests that the participants who reported negative experiences with race were overwhelmingly Black and Mixed-race. Black Caribbean student participants reported experiences of racism and discrimination as they recalled recent situations. This finding about Black Caribbean student participants is mostly consistent with what has been reported in the literature. Both Blake (2006) and Boafo-Arthur (2013) claim that many Black-African international students often experience issues of prejudice and discrimination which was evident in this study. However, the Black Caribbean student participants in this study embraced their Black identity which contradicts what Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) found about how Afro-Caribbean international students align themselves; in their study the participants did not embrace their Black identities.

Participants who were Mixed-race also reported negative racial experiences focused on harassment and not feeling accepted by their peers. Although there were only two Mixed-race participants in this study, this finding could help explain why Lewis and Demie (2018) report that mixed white/black Caribbean students continue to be the lowest performing mixed group in the country because of experiences of marginalization, low expectations that teachers held about them, and the lack of knowledge of how to support them at school (p. 1). However, with such limited literature on Mixed-raced Caribbean students, more research and inquiries are needed on how to better understand their needs. In the implications for research section, I recommend a specific study about Caribbean students and race that could potentially address this need.

In this study, all the participants who identified as Hispanic attended Pimenta State University, a Hispanic-serving institution. Unlike the participants who identified as

Black and Mixed-race, the Hispanic participants' experiences with race were mostly positive, and they were more likely to remain neutral. I believe Pimenta State University being a Hispanic-serving institution greatly impacted these participants' racial experiences. It was common for the Hispanic student participants to talk about how fortunate they were to connect to others from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean on a daily basis, which made them feel welcome at Pimenta State University. The five participants were also the least likely to provide detailed responses regarding race. Hence, more robust research with and about Hispanic students who attend an institution other than one that is Hispanic-serving may be needed to more holistically capture their racial experience.

Today, the prevalence of racist incidents and the now visible presence of white nationalism throughout the United States, including on colleges campuses, make creating a welcoming environment a challenging endeavor for higher education institutions. Institutions may benefit from establishing safe and brave spaces where students can voice concerns, train staff on how to discuss racial issues, and commit to reviewing harassment and anti-discrimination policies yearly. Fortunately, many institutions of higher education in the United States have already committed to these goals, and some are making progress towards achieving them. For example, both student affairs and academic units on many campuses are assessing their climate, admission policies, and current programming to ensure that they are doing everything possible to meet the needs of all students. It is urgent that these practices continue. I recommend to institutions of higher education that need assistance in launching these strategies consult with peer institutions

that are that are already actively working to address racial issues, for assistance and guidance.

### **Differences and Commonalities of Caribbean Students' Experiences**

The second research question of this study aimed to address the differences and commonalities in the experiences of the Caribbean student participants. Data related to this question showed that the differences were focused on immigration status and language while the commonalities were the need for financial support and family as a priority. These findings are significant because the Caribbean is often classified as a homogenous region, leading to false assumptions about students who come from there. The differences and commonalities in the Caribbean student participants' experiences illuminate an urgent need for student-specific resources. By this I mean it is imperative that educators who work closely with Caribbean students to know that while they may come from the same region of the world, they are unique in their own way.

Regarding immigration status, Caribbean student participants who were in the United States as nonimmigrants were more negatively impacted by their immigration status (e.g., employment and travel), and thus reported their immigration status as being more salient to their identity. Conversely, Caribbean student participants who were U.S. citizens and permanent residents were less connected to their immigration status and had more positive experiences at their undergraduate institutions. The work of Bevis and Lucas (2007) may help contextualize this finding mainly because of how it connects to events related to immigration in the United States. They claim immigration laws in the U.S. have negatively affected foreign student enrollment from the beginning because

regulations and rules employed to enforce or restrict immigration have reflected the political and social climate of the country (Bevis & Lucas, 2007, p. 56). We are seeing this enacted at this very moment. One could argue that immigration is probably the most contentious topic in the United States. On July 14, 2019, President Trump tweeted:

So interesting to see Progressive Democrat Congresswomen who originally came from countries whose governments are a complete and total catastrophe, the worst, most corrupt and inept anywhere in the world (if they have a functioning government at all), now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth, how our government is to be run. Why don't they go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came from...

This tweet had a negative impact on the lives of immigrants and triggered anger among those who advocate for them. Just a few weeks after this tweet, on August 6, 2019, a White man drove nine hours to El Paso, Texas, a predominantly Latino city in western Texas, and shot people at a local Walmart store (NBC News, August 8, 2019). Twenty-two individuals, many of whom were Hispanics, were killed in the shooting. The shooter informed the local authorities that he was in fact targeting Hispanics (AP News, August 10, 2019). Furthermore, there are various reports that claim this White man was motivated by the recent xenophobic and racist tweets of President Trump (see Baker & Shear, 2019). There are close connections among these current political events, the work of Bevis and Lucas (2007), the tweet, the shootings, and the experiences of Caribbean student participants as it relates to their immigration status. When a leader publicly echoes racist and xenophobic sentiments, it is not only likely to cause fear among immigrants, but it can cause those who were searching to validate their White

supremacist or anti-immigrant beliefs to enact violence. In the wake of these tragic events, I recommend that institutions provide a higher level of support to both Caribbean and other international students. I expand my recommendation to include other international students because this dynamic could impact all students who come from a different country, including non-immigrant and immigrant students and students with parents and other family members who are in the United States from other countries.

Another significant difference among the experiences of Caribbean students was related to language. Thirteen Caribbean student participants from English and French-speaking Caribbean islands at Pimenta State University struggled with the predominant Spanish-speaking environment. At the same institution, participants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean revealed they were comforted by the predominantly Spanish-speaking environment within that institution. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to frequently speak their native language and make both formal and informal connections with their peers from the same islands in the Caribbean. Previous research has found that professors question international students' language abilities and that their teaching practices are not always aligned with their beliefs (Redden, 2018). Given that language has long been identified as a challenge facing Caribbean and other international students, an opportunity exists for university leadership to determine ways to better transition English-speaking Caribbean students to a Hispanic-serving institution if their campuses are to be welcoming to all Caribbean students. In this study, language mainly came up as a challenge with the students at Pimenta State University.

The commonalities in the experiences of the Caribbean student participants were enlightening. Nine Caribbean student participants of this study were international students. The assumptions that international students are capable of financially supporting themselves, pay full tuition, and contribute financially to the U.S. economy was proven to be misleading at best in this study. It is misleading because, while it is true that some international students can financially support themselves, that was not the case for the nine Caribbean student participants of this study who were international students. Hence, this finding emphasizes the importance of not homogenizing students. Almost all Caribbean student participants of this study shared that they would not have been able to attend an institution of higher education had it not been for scholarships and other financial assistance. So, while organizations like NAFSA (2017) claim, “International students studying at U.S. colleges and universities contributed \$36.9 billion to the U.S. economy and support over 450,000 jobs” (p. 1), additional context should be shared with readers, such as the region of the world where these international students are coming from and the amount of scholarships or financial aid they receive. This is important because based on the stories shared by the Caribbean student participants, it does not support much the accepted assertion of international students having high socioeconomic status (SES). Continuing to delve into this area, through additional research, may help delineate between the experiences of varying SES-situated international students, both within specific countries/regions as well as across them.

Another similarity among the experiences of Caribbean student participants was the way they valued their family. Family members of Caribbean student participants went

to extreme measures and were strategic in their efforts to get them a U.S.-based education. In return, Caribbean student participants were appreciative of their families' efforts and dedication. This appreciation factored into how they allowed family members to influence their personalities, behaviors, and what they value during their undergraduate experience. There is limited research that looks specifically at the roles that family may play in the experiences of Caribbean students. However, this study suggests that institutions of higher education that enroll Caribbean students should consider making additional efforts in providing resources that connect them with their families.

### **Academic, Cultural, and Social Experiences of Caribbean Students**

The final research question of this study aimed to address the academic, cultural, and social experiences of the Caribbean student participants. Serino (2017) shared that the Brown Center replicated a survey that was done for all international students to learn about their academic experiences in 2001 and found, "International students still think U.S. schools are much less challenging than schools in their home country" (p. 1). This sentiment was reiterated when the Caribbean student participants (immigrants and non-immigrants) shared about their academic experiences. The most noteworthy finding around academics though was the connection participants made to their professors. The majority of the participants admired their professors, outlining the ways interactions with them positively impacted their experiences. Conversely, a few participants reported negative academic experience because of encounters with professors who were not culturally responsive in their teaching and learning. All this happened without me asking about their interactions with professors during the one-on-one interviews and focus

group. While there is some research that points to how professors view international students, there is limited research that examines how Caribbean students view their professors. I recommend that professors who teach and interact with Caribbean students in their departments be made aware of the impact they may have on the students' academic experiences and be offered resources that would enable them to be responsive to their needs.

Culturally, narratives around food and their Caribbean accent dominated the conversations around their experience. Specifically, the lack of access to authentic Caribbean cuisine had a negative impact on the cultural experiences of a few Caribbean student participants. Also embedded within the participants' cultural experience was the challenges created by their Caribbean accent and the weather, for the participants who attended institutions in the northeast United States. Whether participants were from an English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, or French-speaking Caribbean island and regardless of the region of the United States they attended school, the Caribbean accent played a significant role in their cultural experiences. They shared how their foreign accent labelled them as "other" and created a myriad of challenges during their undergraduate experience. The main strategy revealed by Caribbean student participants around navigating this challenge was the idea of "refining their accent" to be able to blend into their educational environment. Regarding these findings, there may be opportunities for dining units on college campus to serve authentic Caribbean cuisine on certain days in an effort to remind Caribbean students of the positive memories of their home. Furthermore, enhanced intercultural trainings given to both students and administrators may create a

more welcoming environment for Caribbean students. While each institution may be at a different stage regarding the level of support they can provide to Caribbean students, it is important to keep these cultural considerations at the forefront whenever the priority is to meet the needs of Caribbean students.

Socially, participants shared about the difficulty they experienced making friends with their domestic peers or those who were not in-tune with their background and upbringing. The participants wanted to make friends with their peers who were born in the United States while they pursued their undergraduate studies. However, many acknowledged that it was difficult to do so and hence gravitated to Caribbean and international students. What was found in this study justifies why researchers such as Tinto (1975) and Bears and Smith (1991) point to the need for institutions to get involved with students as soon as they arrive on campus. With colleges and universities increasingly focused on the social connection of students, both academic and student affairs units at colleges and universities should continue to provide opportunities for Caribbean students to make U.S. born friends.

The Caribbean student participant's experiences with race, the differences and commonalities among their experiences, and the ways in which they navigated their academic, cultural, and social experiences told a comprehensive story about the lives of 18 Caribbean student participants at four undergraduate institutions in the United States. Their narratives reveal the rich and shifting cultures of the Caribbean, and how students who migrate from that region navigate their experiences. The Caribbean student participants are courageous and brave. They are a unique group of students who take their

academics seriously and want to positively give back to their communities. The data captured in Chapters IV, V, and VI will be helpful as institutions of higher education in the United States work to enhance efforts to support Caribbean students by providing a guide to numerous aspects of their experiences.

### **Implications for Research**

This study is the commencement of a larger plan to further investigate the experiences of Caribbean students and ways they can be better supported. Consequently, opportunities exist for further research. The data collected from the Caribbean student participants suggests possible research to be undertaken in the future. First, the issue of social connections remains a concern for Caribbean students as they seek to meet and get to know their peers. I believe there is an opportunity for greater utilization of current programs to meet the social needs of Caribbean students, particularly as it relates to friendship. Hence, conducting a case study on the purpose, structure, and effectiveness of social programs designed for Caribbean students could be useful. Within this case study, it could be helpful to determine, through both qualitative and quantitative means, how domestic students engage with Caribbean students. This could provide valuable insights on ways Caribbean students can better connect with their domestic peers.

The present study reveals a dichotomy regarding how university professors impact the experiences of Caribbean students. A qualitative study involving faculty who teach and engage with Caribbean students may be beneficial to learn optimal ways they can better support Caribbean students. Such a study could be centered on the following research questions: In what ways do university professors best connect with Caribbean

students in their classrooms; What pedagogical strategies, if any, should be utilized to help Caribbean students feel welcome in the U.S classroom? Methodologically, it may be useful to compare the results across academic disciplines and institutions. Having faculty from various academic disciplines examine their own perceptions regarding support for Caribbean students could yield culturally-responsive pedagogical approaches that advocate on the behalf of and meet the needs of Caribbean students who pursue their undergraduate studies in the United States.

Third, because there are programs, clubs, and initiatives designed to assist Caribbean students at some institutions, a comparative analysis on the structures of these programs could be an important research project to explore. An-depth look at the similarities and differences of programs, clubs, and initiatives designed for Caribbean students may enhance the effectiveness of these programs. Such a study could be of great significance because I personally know many institutions of higher education who claim they are continually striving to meet the needs of Caribbean students. Furthermore, as we can see from this study, it is possible for an institution to enroll large numbers of Caribbean students and still not be mindful of their unique needs. This comparative analysis could possibly produce robust data that may serve as a foundation to enhancing the experiences of Caribbean students. Given the differences based on race, “accent,” language, and immigration status, distinct studies may be needed based on different groupings of Caribbean students.

One final suggestion for further research is centered on the ways race impacted the experiences of Caribbean students. To provide a deeper analysis on the racial

experiences of Caribbean students, I recommend an ethnographic study that examines how Caribbean students of different races navigate their experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States. The Caribbean student participants of this study revealed different experiences with race based on how they identify and the diverse make-up of the institution they attended. Given what was found in this study, it may be beneficial for researchers to completely immerse themselves in the lives, culture, or situation of Caribbean students based on how they identify racially. An ethnographic study that pays attention to institution type and the race of Caribbean students may produce data that could enhance their overall experiences at institutions of higher education in the United States.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study on Caribbean student experiences may have implications for practice as higher education administrators seek to improve the experiences of Caribbean students. Attention should be given to housing departments that often aim to positively impact the experiences of students living in residential facilities. In this study, many participants referenced that housing programs had a positive impact on their experiences. Similarly, in a pilot study I conducted in 2017 that focused on the residential experiences of international students, I learned that Resident Advisors played an instrumental role in creating welcoming environments for international students in residential spaces. An opportunity exists for housing staff who work directly with Caribbean students to design programs and initiatives that enhance the experiences of Caribbean students. To accomplish this, I recommend that these staff members conduct a needs assessment with

Caribbean students when they first arrive on campus to learn what could be done to improve their experiences. Then, it might be helpful to work closely with the international student office on their campus to plan programs and initiatives that could improve their experiences in residential spaces.

Another important implication for practice is centered on orientation programs for Caribbean students. It is common practice for institutions of higher education to host orientation programs for international students, but these programs may need to be re-imagined based on the data from this study. Many Caribbean students were critical of the orientation programs they experienced. For example, Rachel, who attended Pimenta State University, claimed “my international student orientation was not good. I felt like they just brought us in and we were like in this big auditorium and then like they would just tell you what you need to do to maintain a legal status.” The international student offices on college campuses could explore working with other units to design an orientation program that meet the needs of Caribbean students. Still, it is worth acknowledging that international student offices may be working with students from a lot of different countries which may create additional challenges.

Lastly, institutions of higher education should explore ways to support Caribbean students financially. In this study, a consistent narrative by the Caribbean student participants was how they needed financial support and assistance in order to pursue their education in the United States. This problem is exacerbated because the cost of higher education in the United States has been steadily increasing over the past few years and this trend is expected to continue (Ripley, 2019). Hence, continued attention should be

given regarding financial assistance for Caribbean students. Indeed, this could be a challenge for colleges and universities as there may be policy and legal limitations to some funds and who is eligible. However, I am hopeful and would recommend this be a collaborative task taken on by the scholarships, financial aid, and university development units. Perhaps these groups could work together to demonstrate to those in power that international students who have financial needs can be an instrumental piece of their campus community. When colleges and universities meet the financial needs of Caribbean and other international students, they are more likely to be successful in their new educational environment.

### **A Critical Reflection on What It has Meant to Me to Do This Work**

I was ambivalent about the field of education after spending my academic experience as a business finance student at the undergraduate and graduate levels. My desire was to be a financial analyst at a fortune 500 company on Wall Street after completing my MBA, so exploring a Ph.D. in cultural foundations was a surprising adventure. Still, I know why I decided to pursue this journey. My experiences as a Black international administrator at four PWIs working closely with educators and first-year students who hold marginalized identities put me in search of like-minded students and scholars who were serious about doing critical social justice work. When I started to explore my research interest as a second year Ph.D. student, I was immediately drawn towards research and writing on international students because of the many struggles I experienced as a Caribbean student. My positionalities of being Afro-Caribbean, a dual-citizen (Commonwealth of Dominica and the United States), a social justice advocate,

and a staff member at a global education unit at a PWI influence my lens and perspectives as I approach this research (see Chapter I for additional details on my positionality).

In designing this study, and throughout the individual interviews, focus group, and in writing my findings, I embraced the many aspects of my identity that drew me towards this work. I was connected to the lives and experiences of the participants because of my own personal journey. Similarly, many of the participants were drawn towards the fact that I was someone who was born and raised in the Caribbean and doing research on the experiences of Caribbean students. Doing this research and listening to the lives and experiences of Caribbean students was troubling at times. Not because I did not think my work was meaningful, but because I was now in a position of privilege, as I am a U.S. citizen who is employed full-time at a prestigious research I university. So, while I felt connected to my participants, there were times when I struggled because my experience today is drastically different than what they were experiencing. For example, the concerns about race, immigration, and language that were negatively impacting the participants do not impact me at the same scale, and I grappled with that. Still, hope kept me motivated. My hope was like that which Freire (2005) describes, “The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together and resist together the obstacles that prevent the flowing of our joy” (p. 69). In the midst of being worried and concerned for my participants, I would suddenly become energized. I knew the work we were doing together was going to make a difference in the lives of Caribbean students who would pursue their studies in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

There are many peer-reviewed articles and studies that utilize qualitative and mixed methods to examine the experiences of international students in higher education (see Alfatel, 2016; Baba & Hosoda, 2014; Boafo-Arthur, 2013; Cho & You 2015; Constantine et al., 2005; Glass, 2012; Hegarty, 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Manyika, 2001; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Sherry et al., 2010; Tidwell & Hanassab, 2007; Yan & Sendall, 2016; Yao, 2016; Ye & Inose, 2003). However, there are only a few studies that examined Caribbean students' experiences, and of these limited studies, many only looked at certain aspects of Caribbean students' experiences. To provide a more robust analysis of Caribbean students, this study incorporated 18 interviews and one focus group with Caribbean students to learn about their experiences academically, culturally, socially, and racially. The findings and its analysis portray a comprehensive picture of the experiences of Caribbean student participants who attended four institutions of higher education in the United States. This is important because time should be spent investigating the experiences of Caribbean students if they are to feel welcome in their new environment.

Postcolonial theory added a unique lens to my analysis of the Caribbean student participants' stories. The Caribbean has strong connections to slavery, European colonization, and the plantation system. Participants' narratives included brief extracts of postcolonialism that were centered on the existence of European structures, maintaining their cultures, and financial exploitation. Indeed, the results of this study were multilayered. Academically, the participants reported that they were successful because

of the discipline they had acquired in the Caribbean. Most notable in their academic experience was how university professors both hindered and positively contributed to their success. Culturally, participants reported the ways a lack of authentic Caribbean food, changes in weather (for participants who attended institutions in the northeast United States), and their Caribbean accent impacted their experiences. Socially, participants connected their experiences to friendship, and they reported the successes and challenges around such relationships. Racially, participants who reported negative experiences with race were overwhelmingly Black and Mixed-raced while the participants reporting race had no impact on their experiences or remained neutral were overwhelmingly Hispanic. Taken together, the stories and narratives around the experiences of Caribbean student participants study are instrumental if faculty, staff, and administrators are to explore innovative strategies to enhance their experiences.

Throughout the research process, I was constantly reminded of my own personal journey as a Caribbean student when I interacted with the participants. With all the negative immigration rhetoric in the United States, Caribbean students are dealing with a wide array of fear and uncertainty. Despite these horrific happenings, I remained hopeful and, likewise, attempted to instill hope in the participants as they grappled with their identity and experiences. President Barack Obama, in his 2008 book *The Audacity of Hope*, states, “There is not a Black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America- there is the United States of America” (p. 231). Still, he cautions readers on the interpretation of his words by sharing, “To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters - that the fight for equality has been won, or that the

problems that minorities face in this country today is largely self-inflicted” (p. 232). This means that we have not arrived at the light at the end of the tunnel, we must not take an ahistorical approach toward efforts for unity, and the work to support Caribbean students is more important now than ever before if we want to achieve a more socially-just United States of America. This study has contributed to this important task by sharing imperative narratives related to the academic, cultural, racial, and social experiences of Caribbean students and the differences and commonalities among these experiences.

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## APPENDIX A

### VIDEO OR IN-PERSON INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW INTRODUCTION AND QUESTIONS

Hello,

I would like to start by thanking you for being here to participate in this individual interview. The purpose of our conversation today is to understand your academic, cultural, and social experiences as a Caribbean student and the role of race in your experiences at institutions of higher education. Please know that I am looking for authentic answers. Because you have first-hand experience in that area, I will look to you as someone who has a lot of experience and insight.

I would like to mention the importance of confidentiality in this process. Confidentiality is probably the most important piece of this interview. Because I believe that confidentiality is necessary for our time together to be successful, the information you share with me will be used solely for the purposes of collecting data for this dissertation study. I will protect your identity by using a pseudonym if I need to refer to you or specific information you have shared with me during the interview. I plan to use a pseudonym in the transcripts and during the data analysis portion of this project.

During the interview, it is ok to ask questions of me. I will not be offended if you ask me any question during the course of the interview, especially if you are trying to clarify a question that I ask. I want you to feel comfortable asking me these questions. In order to stay focused, I am kindly asking that you put away any electronic devices (such as laptop, cellphone, iPad) so we stay focused on the interview. I will record our conversation with an audio recorder to ensure that I am accurately capturing our conversation.

Please remember that I am looking for authentic answers. If you do not have any further question, I will start the interview by asking you the first question.

1. Where are you from?
2. How did you learn about college in the United States?
3. What made you decide to attend college in the United States?
4. Is there anything else about your life before coming to college that would be helpful for me to know to better understand your academic, cultural, and social experiences as a Caribbean student at University Y?

5. Describe your overall experience as a student at X University?
- a. What was your most rewarding academic experience (in the classroom, etc.)? How does your academic experience compare to your academic experience before coming to the United States? What are some of your academic challenges and how do you cope with them?
  - b. What was your most rewarding cultural experience since arriving in the United States? How does your cultural experience compare to your cultural life before coming to the United States? What were some of your cultural challenges and how did you cope with them?
  - c. What was your most rewarding social experience? How does your social experience compare to your social life before coming to the United States? What are some of your social challenges and how do you cope with them?
  - c. Talk to me about your experiences of making friends on campus (for example, how easy was it to make friends? What are some of the challenges to making friends?
6. What types of academic, cultural, and social programs and/or activities do you currently attend at University Y and why? What campus programs did you find the most beneficial to you? What about least beneficial?
7. Talk to me about your experience as a person of color on your campus. In what ways do you believe race affected your experience as a Caribbean student studying at University Y?
8. What recommendations would you make to University administrators, faculty, and staff as it relates to improving the academic, cultural, and social experience of Caribbean students? Why?
9. Given that I'm interested in the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students and their experiences as a person of color, is there anything else you would like to tell me that I might not have thought to ask?

## APPENDIX B

### VIDEO OR IN-PERSON FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION AND QUESTIONS

Hello,

I would like to start by thanking you for being here to participate in this focus group. The purpose of our conversation today is to understand your academic, cultural, and social experiences as a Caribbean student. I am looking to learn about the effect of race on your experience. Please know that I am looking for authentic answers. Because you have first-hand experience in that area, I will look to you as someone who has a lot of experience and insight.

I would like to mention the importance of confidentiality in this process. Confidentiality is probably the most important piece of this focus group. Because I believe that confidentiality is necessary for our time together to be successful, the information you share with me will be used solely for the purposes of collecting data for this dissertation study. I will protect your identity by using a pseudonym if I need to refer to you or specific information you have shared with me during the interview. I plan to use a pseudonym in the transcripts and during the data analysis of this project. I ask that you respect the confidentiality of your peers. Please do not share information you hear in this group with other people.

During the focus group, it is ok to ask questions of each other and me. I will not be offended if you ask me any question during the course of the focus group, especially if you are trying to clarify a question that I ask. I want you to feel comfortable asking me these questions. In order to stay focused, I am kindly asking that you put away any electronic devices (such as laptop, cellphone, iPad) so we stay focused on the interview. I will record our conversation with an audio recorder to ensure that I am accurately capturing our conversation.

Please remember that I am looking for authentic answers. If you do not have any further question, I will start the focus group by asking you the first question.

1. Can we go around the room and do introductions? Please state your name, your country of birth, and a reason why you decided to pursue your studies in the United States.

2. Talk to me about your experience as a Caribbean student. I am particularly interested in hearing about your experiences in the U.S. academic classroom, cultural success and challenges, and social successes and challenges.
3. What role do you think race has played in your experiences as a Caribbean student? In what ways do you think the University environment contributed to that?
4. What University programs do you think are important for Caribbean students to have a positive collegiate experience (academically, culturally, and socially)?
5. How do you think Universities can improve the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students?
6. Can you talk to me about your experiences as a person of color on your campus? In what ways do you believe race affected your experience as a Caribbean student studying at University Y?
7. Given that I am interested in the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students and their experiences as a person of color, is there anything else you would like to tell me or we should discuss that I might not have thought to ask?

## APPENDIX C

### LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN IN-PERSON OR VIDEO INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Hello,

My name is Hazael Andrew and I am a PhD student in the Educational Leadership/Cultural Foundations department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am originally from the Commonwealth of Dominica and came to the United States as an international student. I am doing a study to learn about the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States. I am also looking to learn about the role that race has played in the experiences of Caribbean students.

I would like to conduct an interview and/or focus group with you to learn about your experience because you identify as a Caribbean student.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me via email at [REDACTED] or mobile phone at [REDACTED]. Please see enclosed consent form. I will return a fully signed copy for your records. I thank you for your consideration.

Thank you,

Hazael Andrew  
Ph.D. student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

## APPENDIX D

### FOLLOW-UP TO PARTICIPATE IN IN-PERSON OR VIDEO FOCUS GROUP

Hello,

My name is Hazael Andrew and I am a PhD student in the Educational Leadership/Cultural Foundations department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I am doing a study to learn about the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States. I am also looking to learn about the role that race has played in the experiences of Caribbean students.

I would like to conduct an interview and/or focus group with you in-person or via video to learn about your experience because you identify as a Caribbean student.

If you are interested in participating in this study, **please contact me via email at [REDACTED] or mobile phone at [REDACTED] no later than Friday, November 28.** Please see enclosed consent form. I will return a fully signed copy for your records. I thank you for your consideration.

Thank you,

Hazael Andrew  
Ph.D. student, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

## APPENDIX E

### RECRUITMENT FLIER

#### Research Study on Caribbean Students

Are you from the Caribbean? Are you interested in participating in a research study that seek to learn about the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education? **Please email Hazael Andrew at**

#### Criteria for Participation

- Self-identified as being from the Caribbean region
- Currently attends or recently graduated from an institution of higher education in the United States
- Currently enrolled in a college or successfully completed the degree requirements from an undergraduate institution.
- Have not been living in the United States for more than 8 years.

Participants selected will be asked to answer questions about their academic, cultural, and social experiences at the institution of higher education they attended. This will be done via a focus group and/or one on one interview that last no more than 90 minutes.



## APPENDIX F

### IRB CONSENT

My name is Hazael Andrew and I am a PhD candidate in the Educational Leadership/Cultural Foundation (ELC) department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study to learn about the academic, cultural, and social experiences of Caribbean students at institutions of higher education in the United States. Given your background and experiences, you are in an ideal position to give me valuable direct knowledge from your own perspective.

I would like to share some background information about me. I am originally from the Commonwealth of Dominica, a very small island in the southern Caribbean which is perfectly situated between two French islands, Guadeloupe to the north and Martinique to the south. On September 25, 2001, exactly two weeks after the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, I came to the United States as a international student. My journey as an international student started in high school in Miami, Florida and continued throughout my graduate studies at Mississippi State University in Starkville, MS. As an international student, I experienced a myriad of academic, cultural, and social successes and challenges. Given my desire to see all Caribbean students be successful, I am hoping to conduct a qualitative study for my dissertation with the goal of sharing the voices of Caribbean students so that institutions of higher education in the United States can better support them.

I am asking you to participate in this research study because you are currently classified as an international student with a Caribbean background. I believe your experiences will help me better understand the experiences of other Caribbean students. There are potential benefits to you participating in this study. First, your participation in this study will help me and institutions of higher education in the United States better understand the ways in which Caribbean students thrive at their institutions. This is important because colleges and universities in the United States have increased their enrollment of Caribbean students. Second, you will get to relive various aspects of your college experience. Third, you will be taking an active role in helping institutions of higher education better support Caribbean students. I believe there is minimal risk involved in participating in this study, but it is important to note that this study will require you to discuss experiences while you were in college which could trigger emotions.

I will be the principal investigator in this study and will not disclose to anyone that you are participating in this study. Furthermore, I will protect your identity by using a

pseudonym if I need to refer to you or specific information you have shared with me during the interview. In an effort to accurately portray the information you will share with me, I am requesting your permission to record our interview. If you give me permission to record the interview, I will treat the content of these digital recordings with a high degree of confidentiality. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording. I plan to keep the digital recorder locked in a secure location. As soon as I conclude this study, I will dispose of them so they are not available to anyone. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Please note that absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

If you decide to participate in this study, I will spend time with you asking a series of questions in an in-person or video one-one-one interview about your experience as a Caribbean student. I expect our time together to last no more than 1 hour and 30 minutes. It is important to note that I am looking for authentic answers. I am looking to learn about your academic, social, and cultural experiences as a Caribbean student. Because you have first-hand experience in that area, I will look to you as someone who has a lot of experience and insight. It is important to note that I am not looking for “correct” answers. You may also be asked to participate in a 2-hour focus group.

Lastly, your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to stop participating in this study, there will be no consequences. Your decision will not have an impact on the remainder of your time at your college or university if you are still enrolled as a student. If there are any questions about this study, you can contact me via email at [REDACTED] or phone at [REDACTED]. You can also contact my faculty advisor Dr. Silvia Bettez via email at [REDACTED] or phone at [REDACTED]. If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study, please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNC-G toll-free at [REDACTED].

Sincerely,

Hazael Andrew