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This study examines how Anglophone West African women construct their identities in the United States. As women originating from countries where the majority of people are black and where they do not have “a black identity” in their consciousness, they now face a new situation in America where they are considered primarily through the color of their skin. All other aspects of their identity, their race, gender, education, family and religion are subsumed in this black identity. The researcher who is also a woman from Anglophone West Africa and now living in the United States examines blackness in America and seeks to find out how Anglophone West African women reconsider and recreate aspects of their identity as black women in the United States.

Using narrative research methodology, this researcher collected oral stories from five women from Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. Narrative research methodology is suitable for this study as the tradition of storytelling and transmitting wisdom through oral methods has been acclaimed as having its roots in Africa. The researcher asked her study participants to tell her the story of their lives. After the women spoke without being interrupted, the researcher then asked the women questions on women, race, education, and friendships. She tape recorded these narratives, transcribed and analyzed them while noting the features of narrative research within the stories.

The researcher found that the women in her study reject the stereotypes ascribed to black people in the United States and strive to differentiate themselves from black Americans by emphasizing their origins and the positives from their backgrounds. They

use family, education and religion to buttress them against difficulties they encounter.

Furthermore, they revise African gender expectations and remain connected with kith and kin back in their countries of origin.

ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICAN WOMEN  
IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
II. REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE .....	7
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	7
Anglophone West Africa: A Brief History .....	8
Independence: The Hope for True Liberation and Prosperity .....	8
Politics: Coups and Counter Coups .....	9
Nigeria.....	9
Sierra Leone .....	10
Ghana .....	10
Liberia .....	11
Women in Anglophone West Africa: Pre- and Post- Independence .....	12
Why Anglophone West African Women Come to the United States .....	16
Experiences of Anglophone West African Women Who Settle in the United States .....	17
Anglophone West African Women’s Identity as Women in the United States .....	21
Blackness in the United States .....	21
Modes of Blackness in the United States—Thin and Thick Conceptions of Blackness.....	23
Race and Racism in the United States .....	24
Economic Power .....	28
Family and Religion.....	31
Education .....	34
Community .....	36
Conclusion .....	37
III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS .....	39
Introduction.....	39
Emotions in Narrative Research .....	39
Myself as Researcher .....	41

The Foreign-born American I .....	43
The Listener I.....	44
The Traveler I .....	45
The Sentimental/Nostalgic I .....	46
The Immigrant/American Citizen I.....	46
Defining Narrative Research.....	47
Selectivity, Silence, Slippage, and Intertextuality .....	49
Collective Subjective .....	50
Cultural Framework of Meaning .....	50
Recruitment of Participants.....	51
The Life Stories.....	52
Collecting the Data .....	52
Transcribing the Data.....	54
Analyzing the Data .....	54
Introduction of Participants.....	56
 IV. FINDINGS.....	 63
Introduction.....	63
Themes from the Prompt: “Tell Me the Story of Your Life” .....	64
Family .....	64
Education .....	68
Identity .....	71
Response to Interview Questions.....	72
Education .....	72
The importance of education .....	72
Influence of family on education .....	73
Views of education in the United States .....	74
Educated people’s responsibility to help others get an education.....	76
Problems arising from the lack of education .....	77
Educating a woman versus educating a man .....	78
Women.....	80
Characteristics of Anglophone West African women.....	81
Anglophone West African Women as mothers and wives .....	83
The participants’ mothers .....	84
Society’s expectations of Anglophone West African women.....	86
“Women are to be obedient and submissive” .....	87
Women are to be the gatekeepers of their culture .....	89

Anglophone West African women and American-born women .....	92
Lesbians .....	92
Friends.....	94
Definitions of friends and friendships.....	95
Nurturing friendships .....	96
Race.....	98
Race and racism .....	99
African Americans discriminating against Africans.....	100
Features of Narrative Research in the Findings .....	102
Conclusion .....	107
 V. CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS .....	108
Introduction and Overview .....	108
Conclusions.....	109
Blackness .....	110
Pride in Cultural Values.....	113
Education .....	114
Women in Anglophone West Africa and in the United States .....	116
Reflections .....	117
Narrative Research.....	117
The Self versus the Other.....	119
Anglophone West African Women Interacting with People from Other Cultures .....	121
Home.....	122
Culture of Silence .....	124
Children of Anglophone West African Women Born in the United States .....	127
Recommendations.....	128
 POSTSCRIPT .....	132
 REFERENCES .....	136

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This research examines how Anglophone West African women in the United States construct their identities and how these identities are influenced by race, gender, education, family, and religion. The literature on Anglophone West African women in the United States is scant. However, Arthur (2009), Robinson (2010), Nwosu (2009), Nsonwu (2008), Busia (2003), and Copeland-Carson (2004) have written on this subject. Arthur (2009), writing on the migration of West African women to the United States, brings to light

the multifaceted dimensions of their cultural communities, particularly how they express and define identity, cope with the transnational changes in their lives brought upon by international migration, and the specific circumstances defining the intersections of gender, class, race, and economic relationships that the women form to link them not only to their native homelands but also to the new country and lives that they continue to form in the United States. (p. 1)

Robinson (2010) writes on immigrants to the United States. “What is something of a surprise is the stunning increase in the flow of immigrants from the African continent, with the biggest national groups being Nigerians, Ethiopians, and Ghanaians” (p. 165). Nwosu calls for more research on understanding Africans’ conceptualization of intercultural competence. “The need to study and understand how Africans conceptualize intercultural competence has become increasingly paramount” (2009, p. 158). Jackson and Cothram’s (2003) study is also relevant to my research. Their study is on the

relationships among Africans, African Americans, and African Caribbean persons. These researchers call for “more Afrocentric education in the curriculum (from elementary school to college) as a means of reeducating people to have a better perspective of the African diaspora and to dispel myths and negative stereotypes about African people” (p. 576). Busia (2005) also documents, through her critique of the Colonial novel, how African women are portrayed in negative ways. “Black women seldom have names, for they are not so much people as presences—*fleshy* presences to be sure, but seldom accorded even the shadowy amount of dramatic substance with which Conrad endows his apparition” (p. 249). These negative portrayals of Africans and African women in particular in the United States stem from the fact that they are black and that they come from Africa, Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness.”

Many Anglophone West African women, who travel from West Africa to the United States, for the first time, find out that the color of their skin becomes the central focus of their identity. These women have to figure out how to recreate aspects of their identity by the way *they define themselves* and not accept how they are defined by others. As a woman from Anglophone West Africa who has lived in, studied in, and traveled within several countries in Africa, Europe, and America, I have had different experiences as a black woman in my host countries. When I started teaching at one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States in the early 90s, I became even more aware of issues of skin color and how a person’s black identity is the central feature through which that individual is considered amongst both black people and white people.

This research is important because it focuses black people who were not born and raised in the United States. The theme of blackness is prominent in the American psyche and the term “black” as it relates to people still has many negative connotations. While some regard the term as relating to skin color regardless of origin, others regard it as a term reserved for the group of African Americans whose struggles in America have got them to the point of identifying as “a people.” Black for them means more than skin color; it includes the civil rights struggle. Still others believe that since all black people originate from Africa, the term “black” belongs first and foremost to Africans.

In Chapter II, I review the scholarly literature pertaining to my study, *Anglophone West African Women in the United States*. I first of all give an overview of the Anglophone West African countries from which my participants in the study come. These five women come from Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone. I start with the political situation at independence. Takougang (2003) discusses the feelings of the nationals of African countries at the time they gained independence from their “colonial powers” and the hope they had for liberation and prosperity. I also discuss in this chapter how this hope at independence was dashed as there was political turmoil which led to multiple coups in these countries, and I give the present situation in each of the countries.

I also devote a section of this review to how women in Anglophone West Africa identify themselves and how their societies define them. I look into reasons why women leave their countries for the United States. Instability of these nations caused by wars in this area is a major factor. The experiences of these women who leave for the United States are also discussed. I discuss issues of blackness, the modes of blackness, thin and

thick blackness from the perspectives of individuals, researchers, and the United States Government. I discuss how being black in this country has an impact on one's understanding of race, gender, family, and education. I finally review the literature on how Anglophone West African women deconstruct and reconstruct their identities and how they use their economic power, education, family, religion and their community to recreate new identities.

In Chapter III, I first of all explain my research methodology. For this study, I use narrative research, which has to do with collecting and analyzing people's stories. I write about emotions in research and give my own perspective. I write about myself as a Sierra Leonean woman and how that background has led me to this study. I identify and audit my biases and subjectivity using my "subjective I's" (Peshkin, 1988). Using Peshkin's methodology, I identify the following "I's" as my "subjective I's": *The Foreign-born American I*, *The Listener I*, *The Traveler I*, *The Sentimental/Nostalgic I*, and the *Immigrant/American citizen I*. Then I define what I mean by "narrative research," and present and explain the key terms used in this methodology: *selectivity*, *silence*, *slippage*, *intertextuality* and the *collective subjective*. I explain how I recruited my participants, collected, transcribed and analyzed their stories. I gave each woman the prompt, "tell me the story of your life" and allowed her to speak without interrupting her until it was clear that she had finished her narration. Finally, I introduce my participants in the study: Afafa and Effie from Ghana, Yata from Liberia, Iya from Sierra Leone, and Olu-Ola from Nigeria. These are all pseudonyms I gave the women to protect their identities.

In Chapter IV, I give the findings of my research. First of all, I summarize the narratives of my study participants in two main sections under headings and subheadings that I identified from the narratives. The first section is on the uninterrupted narratives and the second section is on the data I collected from the general questions I asked my study participants on education, women, race, and friends. I discuss the common themes in the uninterrupted narratives of the five women I interviewed. The themes that emerged from these women's narratives are family, education, and identity. I followed up the uninterrupted narratives with interview questions I had prepared to ask them on education, women, friends, and race. I chose these themes because I hoped that my interviewees would address issues of their identity as they speak on these topics. These main topics are broken down into subthemes that emerged from the narratives. Some of my narrators' views on women are "characteristics of Anglophone West African women," "women as mothers and women as wives," and "Anglophone West African women and African American women."

In Chapter V, I give my conclusions, reflections and recommendations of the study. Here, I highlight important aspects and insights gained from the study, reflected on issues I encountered during the study, and made recommendations for areas in which more research is needed. I give my conclusions on blackness, education, and pride in cultural values. I also make concluding remarks on Anglophone West African women's identity in West Africa and in the United States. Amongst other topics, I reflect on "the 'self' versus the 'other,'" the notion of "home," "the culture of silence," and "the children of Anglophone West African women born in the United States."

Finally, from the findings of my study, I make recommendations for further research that will help Anglophone West African countries understand the impact of emigration of women from their countries. I also make recommendations for universities because all my study participants are university students. Findings from my study will help universities think more on how they can use international students to diversify their campuses. These findings will also help international affairs offices enhance cross-cultural interactions between American-born students and international students, and faculty members develop courses that would help students learn about others and be able to interact with others face to face or virtually. Most importantly, the findings of this study will hopefully spark more research for Historically Black Colleges and Universities to help black students understand black identities worldwide.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction and Overview of the Chapter**

This study focuses on Anglophone West African women who come to the United States, and, probably, for the first time in their lives, face the issue that the color of their skin plays a large part in their identity. It investigates how these women construct their identities in the United States and how these identities are influenced by race, gender, education, family and religion. The Anglophone West African women have to think about their identity, how they define themselves and how they are defined by others in all aspects of their lives.

In the first part of this chapter, I give a brief background of the countries in Anglophone West Africa from which my study participants come. I review the economic, educational, and political situations in these countries after they gained independence from their colonizers and the coups that took place after independence, and the decade-long wars that were waged in especially Liberia and Sierra Leone. Within this background, I investigate how women identify themselves and are identified by others in the Anglophone West African context. In the second part of the chapter, I discuss why women from Anglophone West Africa come to the United States. In the third part of the chapter, I discuss the experiences of these women as they settle in the United States. As I research the experiences of Anglophone West African women in the United States I

investigate how these experiences are similar to or different from those of my study participants and how, if at all, the women in my study address issues faced by West African women in general in the United States. I discuss issues of blackness, race and racism in this country and how being black in the United States has an impact on one's race, gender, education, and family life. In the fourth and last part of this chapter, I focus on how these women deconstruct and reconstruct their identities. I discuss these identities in light of their economic power, education, family and religion, and community. Albeit that this is a small study with five participants from four Anglophone West African countries, the findings add to research in the field of black identities, race and gender in the United States.

### **Anglophone West Africa: A Brief History**

There are five Anglophone West African countries—Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and the Gambia. I omit the Gambia from this discussion of the Anglophone West African countries because none of my research participants come from the Gambia.

### **Independence: The Hope for True Liberation and Prosperity**

With the exception of Liberia, which gained independence from the United States in the 19th century (July 26, 1847), all the other Anglophone West African countries gained independence from Britain in the 20th century, the late 1950s to mid-60s: Ghana—March 6, 1957; Nigeria—October 1, 1960; and Sierra Leone—April 27, 1961. These nations had great hopes at independence. The people believed that gaining their independence from the “colonial masters” would give their indigenous leaders the

opportunity to develop their countries for their nationals. They imagined that independence would bring about a better life for the ordinary people with an improvement in their economic lives and a better future for their children. And, of course, the politicians promised to deliver. Takougang (2003) states

At independence, Africans were filled with tremendous hope and optimism. For many Africans, independence was seen as more than just a period of self-rule and freedom. In their campaign speeches and rhetoric, they were led by many of the nationalist leaders to believe that independence would also lead to a significant improvement in their social and economic life, including improvements in education and healthcare, and greater employment opportunities. Indeed, the institution of single party rule shortly after independence in many African states was rationalized on the basis that it was the next logical political step to a more stable political environment and ultimately to impressive socio-economic development. (p. 2)

Africans were later to realize that independence was not the panacea for solving all their problems. After independence, these fledgling nations all went through similar patterns of coups, counter coups, corruption in politics, and economic decline.

### **Politics: Coups and Counter Coups**

**Nigeria.** When Nigeria became independent in 1960 with Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as the first prime minister, it didn't take long for the politicians to start talks on becoming a republic. This took place in 1963, three years after independence, and Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe became the first president. Three years later, in 1966, which was six years after independence, Nigeria had its first military coup. Tafawa Balewa and other top leaders were killed. The second military coup took place six months later in the same year. More coups and civil wars were to follow. The current president of the country is Goodluck Jonathan who has been president since May 6, 2010.

**Sierra Leone.** A similar situation played out in Sierra Leone. The country gained its independence in 1961 with Sir Milton Margai as the first prime minister. In 1967, six years after independence, Sierra Leone had its first military coup, which overthrew the civilian government. The brigadier who ousted the civilian government was also overthrown a year later by a “sergeants’ revolt.” The sergeants reinstated the civilian government with Siaka Stevens as head of the country. He ruled for 18 years. After this relative period of calm, the country went back to decades of instability with coups, counter coups, and rebel wars that wreaked havoc on the nation. The rebels tortured, raped, maimed, and killed innocent civilians. They abducted young boys and girls and used them as child soldiers and sex slaves. They plundered, burnt, and literally wiped out entire cities and towns. Their horrendous signature branding was the amputation with machetes of citizens, from babies to village elders. Aided by the then Liberia’s president, Charles Taylor, they not only sought political power but also the diamond mines of the country. Sierra Leone was finally saved by the Commonwealth of Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) through the Nigerian-led peacekeeping force ECOMOG. The country currently experiences relative peace under the president, Ernest Bai Koroma, who was reelected president on November 17, 2012.

**Ghana.** Ghana gained its independence in 1957 with Kwame Nkrumah as its first prime minister. Just like in the case of Nigeria, Ghana became a republic (1960) three years after independence. Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister, was elected the first president of the nation. In 1964, Ghana’s constitution was amended to make the country a one-party state and Nkrumah the country’s life president. Ghana enjoyed peace and

economic prosperity for a few years. In February 1966, Ghana had its first military coup. In 1972 there was another military coup. Between 1982 and 1983, there were several coup attempts by disgruntled factions of the army. Again, there were coups and counter coups in the 1990s with Jerry Rawlings at the center of these coups. The current president is John Dramani Mahama who was sworn into office on July 24, 2012 on the death of the former leader, John Atta Mills.

**Liberia.** Unlike the other Anglophone West African countries that gained their independence between the late 50s and mid-60s, Liberia gained its independence in 1847. The country, which was set up by freed slaves, the Americo-Liberians from the United States, had relative peace for 133 years after independence. Its first coup d'état was in 1980 when a Master Sergeant Samuel Doe seized power and his forces executed the then president, William Tolbert. Political parties were banned until 1984. When elections were held in 1985, Samuel Doe's political party won. A former army commander, Thomas Quiwonkpa who invaded Liberia by way of Sierra Leone attempted to overthrow Doe. He was unsuccessful and was executed. During the next decade, Liberia experienced one of the bloodiest periods in African history. The civil war saw the ousting of Samuel Doe leaving the country in the hands of Charles Taylor who oppressed his people and supported rebels in neighboring Sierra Leone. This war left both countries severely destabilized and impoverished. At present, there is relative calm in Liberia under the leadership of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the current president, who is also the first female president of an African country. She took the oath of office for her second term of presidency on January 16, 2012.

It is against this political background of Anglophone West Africa that influences all aspects of society—economic, cultural, human rights, education—that I consider the Anglophone West African women in the United States.

### **Women in Anglophone West Africa: Pre- and Post-Independence**

How are women in Anglophone West Africa defined and how do they define themselves? Some writers have depicted them as being wards of first their fathers and then their husbands, as minors who have to be cared for and be always kept in subordination. Others have highlighted their independence and noted that they have control of their lives and their resources. Sudarkasa (1996) joins the latter and attests to the fact that from her readings and research among the Yoruba in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa

It appears that except for the highly Islamized societies in sub-Saharan Africa, in this part of the world more than any other, in precolonial times women were conspicuous in high places. They were queen-mothers; queen-sisters; princesses; chiefs; and holders of other offices in towns and villages; occasional warriors; and, in one well-known case, that of the Lovedu, the supreme monarch. Furthermore, it was almost invariably the case that African women were conspicuous in the economic life of their societies, being involved in farming, trade, or craft production. (p. 73)

In pre-colonial Africa the social network was built on cooperation. Communal and cooperative values were paramount as men, women, and children saw themselves as belonging to the community rather than to a nuclear family as in the western world where individualism and accumulation of personal wealth were stressed. Ownership in pre-colonial Africa was regarded on a communal basis. It did not matter whether the social structure was patrilineal or matrilineal, women had access to land, and they also had

some control over their labor. Polygamy was regarded as beneficial to the community as it gave women more time to themselves for them to travel and engage in business, because they shared responsibility for mothering of their children, taking care of their household, and looking after their husbands. As Steady (2006) points out, “African women had definite social, political, and economic roles that induced them to achieve a measure of independence and autonomy and to develop their self-reliant capabilities through participation in production and reproduction” (p. 6). These women’s role in society had status and it was valued.

The slave trade eroded the independence and autonomy of African women that Steady refers to. Even though African women were an important “capital” and valuable for reproduction of slave labor, they became subjected to the dictates of the new world and the cohesive society they once knew was threatened by racist and sexist colonizers. Colonialism, like the slave trade, disrupted the African woman’s traditional shared responsibility of production and reproduction. Colonialism encouraged social inequality and racial segregation. In Africa the introduction of commercial agriculture and wage earning also contributed to do away with the African women’s pride of owning and producing on their land.

The role of women in colonial and post-colonial Africa has been relegated to a lower position than their male counterparts, even though in some societies it is the women who played the dominant role. Women’s stories were ignored. As Da Silva (2004) points out, “African patriarch has relegated to African women the mythological role of mother even the women who have fought in revolutions were cut out of the

political arena or from full national participation after independence” (p. 132). The concept of motherhood in African societies is seen from a patriarchal viewpoint. A woman is supposed to be fruitful and bear children. If there were no children in the marriage, it was the woman’s fault. If a woman cannot have children, especially sons, she becomes “the barren woman” who should be divorced, cast aside, so that her husband can find someone with whom to procreate and keep the family name alive. Orubuloye (1981) attests that wealthy men, usually farmers in traditional Nigerian society, were “far more likely to be successful in acquiring additional wives than the poor ones because of the high cost of marriage ceremonies in Yoruba society” and adds, “It should, however, be stressed that most men [rich or poor] will be likely to marry a second wife if the first wife failed to have children or give birth to a son” (p. 34). Infertility in marriages was seen as the fault of the woman.

Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) states, “Colonialism has brought out the basic sexist tendencies in pre capitalist Africa. It has calcified existing ones and introduced others” (p. 30). The African woman has been made to feel inferior to the African man, a feeling which she internalizes. African women, alongside their men counterparts welcomed independence. Was it their naiveté that led them to believe that fighting with their men for liberation from the colonial powers would bring them back to the days when they had a say over the production on their land? Their voices were not heard. They lacked education. Their stories, when narrated, were not from their perspectives. Men, who were the few educated ones, wrote the literature.

Current African women writers Oyěwùmí (2003, 2005), Pala (2005), Steady (2006), Busia (2005), Gadzekpo (2005), Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Amadiume (2005), and Njambi (Njambi & O'Brien, 2005), to name a few, are working to correct this situation and rewrite the woman's portrayal in society by men. They are also fighting against the African traditions that oppress women. The foremost tradition is women being denied the right to an education. Pala (2005), for example, states, "African scholars, and especially women, must bring their knowledge to bear on presenting an African perspective on prospects and problems for women in local societies" (p. 302). Da Silva (2004) quotes Ogundipe-Leslie who states that "African women have six mountains on their back and it is important to get rid of them" (p. 135). According to Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), these metaphorical mountains are oppression from outside, structure of the African tradition, man, lack of education (backwardness), color and race, and herself (her low self-esteem). She says

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Their own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. Woman reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed. (p. 36)

Many African women do not see what Ogundipe-Leslie describes as the six mountains on their backs. They think of their struggles in terms of achieving their goals, the basic of which is providing for their families—especially their children, and their religion or faith.

### **Why Anglophone West African Women Come to the United States**

I have already discussed the political situation in these countries, which for the most part weakened the economy of this area. Women leave their countries of origin for a better life elsewhere. Some of these women, having lost their husbands/men in the wars, become the sole bread winners for their immediate and extended families. Arthur (2009) states

Often driven and pushed to leave home due to ethnic strife, civil wars, poverty, chronic and mass unemployment, structural adjustments of economies, decline in food production, patriarchal oppression, ecological destruction, growth in informal economy, and the segmentation of labor in the West, numerous young West African women have come to see international migration as a way of ensuring their own economic survival as well as that of their families. (pp. ix–x)

The women who come to the United States do so for various reasons. Some come in search of work while others come to attend school (usually college or university) and further their education, which in turn would enhance their work credentials. Still others come to reunite with their spouses or family members (siblings, parents, extended family). Many others are forced to leave their countries of origin and migrate to the United States as refugees and asylum seekers. The United States Immigration Act of 1965, which supported family reunification of immigrants already in the United States, favored women to join their spouses. Abdullah (2009) states,

Because many West African Muslims overstayed their visiting or student visas in the 1980s, they later took advantage of the lottery system granting amnesty to undocumented migrants. Once they are permanent residents, married men generally send for the wives and other family members. (p. 6)

Furthermore, those Anglophone West African Women who would normally have gone to Britain, the ex-colonial power, did not do so because of the economic crisis in Europe during this time. It was also not uncommon to have African students attending American universities. Leney (2003) notes that Anglophone West Africa, especially Ghana, benefited from “America’s undoubted prowess in all areas technical and scientific” (p. 167). Through the Carnegie Corporation, the United States provided funding for scholarships to West African students. The Anglophone West African women in my study are in universities in the United States and some of them are on scholarships.

### **Experiences of Anglophone West African Women Who Settle in the United States**

Once in the United States, regardless of how the Anglophone West African Women got to the United States, they all experience adjustment issues. The ease or difficulty with which they settle depends on several factors, which result in their different experiences. They face the challenge of living in a different culture as they settle in a new environment with a different climate, different ways of defining themselves and functioning in a pluralistic society, while at the same time coping with alienation and trying to meet their needs, usually financial, not only for their families here but also for family members in their home countries in Africa. In addition, refugee Anglophone West African Women still deal with the trauma that made them leave their countries. Some of these refugee women are illiterate and do not speak English. All of these refugee women face problems with race, gender, education, and family.

Busia (2003), a Ghanaian who studied in England, recounts her experience on her arrival at Yale University as a teaching fellow in 1980. She says

But though I went around being, as I thought, my usual friendly and gregarious self, for the first time in my life in a new place, I made few friends. The graduate students avoided me, and the junior faculty had little time for me. One day when obsessed about this sense of alienation, my roommate offered an explanation. (pp. 259–260)

It turned out that the roommate (housemate), a white man, with whom Busia was just friends and who was dating an African American woman solved the mystery for her. He let her know that the black graduate students “just couldn’t understand how I could go to parties and just talk to those white folks the way I do” (Busia, 2003, p. 260). She went on to say that after this explanation she moved out of the house. The anger and animosity that these black women directed at her stemmed from the fact that even though all of the women in question were black and one of them was dating a white man, their background and socialization were completely different from that of Busia’s and unbeknown to her, she had transgressed the “subtle line” of social convention. How was she to have known the thinking of these African American women? How should Anglophone West African women be introduced to or guided along the paths of these unspoken social conventions, which are “minefields” in relationships between Blacks and Whites in the United States? What is left unanswered for me in this situation is whether the African American dating the white man was an outcast to the other African American women. Whether or not she was, how was she not able to tell Busia herself?

Busia (2003) also recounts an incident when she went shopping with some of her African American women friends. She remarked that they had been ignored by shop attendants for quite a while until she asked for help at the counter. With her British accent, the attendant realized that she was not African American and was treated

differently. She says, “For some reasons which still bewilder me, the service became solicitous, swift, efficient, and friendly—clearly to be an exotic Negro is more acceptable than being a domestic Negro” (p. 261). I cite Busia because she is an educated woman and the participants in my study are educated women at universities in the United States whose experiences may be similar to hers.

Many Anglophone West African Women enter the United States ignorant about the race relations in the country. Takougang (2003) states, “Despite their dedication, hard work and determination to realize the American Dream African immigrants are often faced with the reality of what Aman calls the ‘innocence about race relations’” (p. 5). In their home countries, they had never been considered minority because of their skin color. Having been made to understand that they are black immigrants because of the color of their skin, they realize that even within this category of black, the degree of blackness as manifested in the tone of one’s skin color is a big factor in how Blacks are perceived—the lighter complexioned Blacks are more favorably considered than the darker ones. Since most of these women are usually dark skinned, they realize that they are the least favored. They are also aware of the fact that their culture is different from other Blacks in America but that it does not shield them from racism.

What is clear is that there seems to be recognition of being different from Black America in terms of cultural values. Differences, no matter how subtle, are not contentious to trigger or cause a rift between these women and the rest of Black America. These women consider themselves part of the growing population of foreign-born Blacks who have joined to form part of the growing Black Diaspora in the United States. (Arthur, 2009, p. 204)

The differences between the immigrant women and African Americans have caused many problems between the two sets of black women especially when African immigrants want to be identified as such and African Americans view them as taking up scant resources that had hitherto been allotted to African Americans. Copeland-Carson (2004) cites an incident during a conference entitled “Understanding African Refugees in our Community.” After a speech highlighting the need for different African immigrant groups and African American civil rights groups to come together and fight racial discrimination, a woman dressed in African attire stood up and emotionally expressed her feelings on building bridges, “If you want to build bridges, then look at me as African. When you look at me, see the spirit of Africa. Look at me as an African; I am not here by choice. Politically, I’m African American: but in my soul and spirit, I’m African” (p. 1). African immigrants usually have to negotiate the United States system of racial classification. They may sometimes identify as “Black,” “African American,” or “Other” and then indicate that they are Africans. Copeland-Carson (2004) cites Sanchez (1997), who

notes that immigrants of African descent, in particular, are directly confronted with this system of racial classification; they are often assigned a racialized status as ‘Black’ or ‘African American,’ on the basis of visible and/or suspected African ancestry, without regard to their particular cultural or political histories. (pp. 21–22)

Black people in the diaspora want to emphasize their cultural differences that set them apart from other people who look like them, and they reject being ascribed labels because of the color of their skin.

## **Anglophone West African Women's Identity as Women in the United States**

### **Blackness in the United States**

In order to situate Anglophone West African women in the United States and discuss how they construct their identities as black women and cope with issues of race and racism, what for many of them is a new phenomenon, I will first of all consider what scholars mean by blackness and then investigate the notion of blackness in the United States and find out how Anglophone West African women react to this term. Shelby (2005) states, "Blackness is a vague and socially imposed category of 'racial' difference that serves to distinguish groups on the basis of their members having certain visible, inherited physical characteristics and a particular biological ancestry" (p. 207). Davis (1991) supports this view of blackness being "vague and socially imposed" and goes on to say that because this "socially constructed category" has a "wide variation in racial traits [it is] therefore not a race group in the scientific sense" (p. 15). Robinson (2010) adds to this discussion on blackness and asserts that "instead of one black America, now there are four" (p. 5). He goes on to identify one of these four as "two newly Emergent groups—individuals of mixed-race heritage and communities of recent black immigrants—that make us wonder what 'black' is even supposed to mean" (p. 5). Who is then considered black in the United States? Davis (1991) uses the official answer to this question. He says

The nation's answer to the question 'Who is black?' has long been that a black is any person with *any* known African black ancestry (Myrdal, 1944:113-18; Berry and Tischler, 1978: 97-98; Williamson, 1980:1-2). This definition reflects the long experience with slavery and later with Jim Crow segregation. In the South it

became known as the ‘one-drop rule,’ meaning that a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person a black. (p. 5)

According to this definition, Anglophone West African women are, without a shadow of a doubt, black. Shelby (2005) intones that black identity in the United States is determined by two criteria: first of all, the physical traits of people—dark skin, thick lips, “kinky” hair, or tightly curled hair—who are descendants from the people of sub-Saharan Africa; secondly, people who are descendants of Africans who do not possess the physical traits in the first criterion but whose ancestors are believed to have had those traits. Even if a person were to identify and embrace a different culture, say the “so called white culture,” one’s physical blackness cannot be erased. This goes back to the one-drop rule. According to these criteria Anglophone West African women are through and through black.

Do Anglophone West African women consider themselves black before coming to the United States? Kanneh (1998), an Anglophone West African woman, states

Situating the politics of race and racism as *the* problem that haunts and constructs the discourses of modernity, the subjectivities we inhabit and the times in which we live, makes dramatically apparent the ways in which ‘race’ has become the founding illusion of our identities. (p. vii)

I agree with her and posit that although Anglophone West African women know the difference in skin color between white people and black people in their countries, they do not have a concept of blackness as an overarching part of their identity. Their identities are constructed from their clan, tribes, region or nationality. This is why the construct of blackness as part of their identity is foreign to them when they arrive in the United States.

Busia (2003) states, “I have known I am African all my life, I did not know I was Black until I started living in the United States a decade and a half ago, and the difference can mean all the difference in the world” (p. 261). Whereas an Anglophone West African woman can go about “un-self-conscious” of the fact that she is “Black” and a “woman” in the United States, and only has to learn this fact, this is not so for the African American. Busia explains, “But being born Black in the United States, you have no choice. It comes to you, in your mother’s milk, so to speak” (p. 261). So, now that an Anglophone West African woman is aware of the identity given to her in the United States, she still has to understand that her blackness is different from the blackness of the African American.

### **Modes of Blackness in the United States—Thin and Thick Conceptions of Blackness**

Having been identified as Black in the United States, the meaning and mode of blackness further come into question. Shelby (2005) states that thin blackness is usually easy to identify because this takes into consideration the physical traits of dark skin, thick lips, “kinky hair” and those descended from people of sub-Saharan Africa. He further states, “Unlike thin blackness, thick blackness can be adopted, altered or lost through individual action” (p. 209). Shelby identifies five modes of thick blackness.

The first mode, the “racialist mode” is black identity based on the presence of a special genotype, which does not exist in non-blacks. In addition to the traits of thin blackness, this special genome is said to be responsible for “temperament, aesthetic sensibility and certain innate talents” (p. 209). The second mode, the ethnic conception of blackness, takes into consideration shared ancestry and common cultural heritage. The

third mode of blackness identified is the nationality concept. A person whose nationality is in one of the countries of sub-Saharan Africa-nation states or has an ethnic identity as a national identity qualifies. There is also the fourth mode, the cultural conception of blackness. This takes into consideration the “identifiable ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices” (Shelby, 2005, p. 211). The fifth and last mode of blackness, according to Shelby, is the kinship mode. Here the concept of black identity is tied to the concept of family. People are referred to as “brother” or “sister” even though they are not related by blood. This is in line with Du Bois conception of race as a “vast family” where there are feelings of connectedness. Just as members of a family would share experiences, so also would Blacks share experiences of racial oppression and are vulnerable to racial discrimination.

It is on to this stage and against this backdrop of blackness in the United States that the Anglophone West African woman enters. Identifying or not identifying as black is irrelevant as whatever the rationale for accepting or rejecting this identity is not sought. This identity is ascribed to her by others.

### **Race and Racism in the United States**

I already discussed the concept of blackness, which is tied to race. Although the United States Declaration of Independence states that one of the truths that the Founding Fathers “hold to be self-evident” is that “all men were created equal,” the Anglophone West African woman in the United States come to question whether the word “men” is to be taken literally and more importantly that people (men and women) belong to different races, which were not created equal. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states:

The concept of race has historically signified the division of humanity into a small number of groups based upon five criteria: (1) Races reflect some type of biological foundation, be it Aristotelian essences or modern genes; (2) This biological foundation generates discrete racial groupings, such that all and only all members of one race share a set of biological characteristics that are not shared by members of other races; (3) This biological foundation is inherited from generation to generation, allowing observers to identify an individual's race through her ancestry or genealogy; (4) Genealogical investigation should identify each race's geographic origin, typically in Africa, Europe, Asia, or North and South America; and (5) This inherited racial biological foundation manifests itself primarily in physical phenotypes, such as skin color, eye shape, hair texture, and bone structure, and perhaps also behavioral phenotypes, such as intelligence or delinquency. (James, 2012, para. 1)

Scholars have challenged this concept of race on all grounds, chiefly historical and biological. What is generally agreed on is that race is a social construct and that humans are generally categorized into four distinct races—white or Caucasian, black or African, yellow or Asian, and red or Native American. Robinson (2010) argues that “There is no valid way to divide people into racial categories—which means that the important thing, where race is concerned, is how people are seen and how they see themselves” (p. 226).

Being black or African in the United States carries with it negative stereotypes, which are usually maintained regardless of position in society or of evidence to the contrary of these stereotypes. For example, the black woman in the United States has been depicted through stereotypes.

Stereotypes such as Jezebel, the low-class seducer, have been used to justify the misuse and abuse of the black woman's body, and Aunt Jemima, the maternal though sexless maid, has been portrayed as totally devoted to white families and content in her role as servant, thereby justifying the exploitation of domestic workers. (Bracks, 1998, p. 17)

Even the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, a black woman, does not escape such stereotypes. In trying to combat obesity in the nation, especially in children, she emphasizes healthy eating and exercise. Her idea of having a vegetable garden at the White House has been ridiculed by critics who use the historical caricature of black women to label her “the Nanny.” Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman, for example, claims that Michelle Obama is trying to implement a new “nanny state” because she encouraged mothers to breastfeed their children.

In the United States, the black race has had a long history of racism. Banks (1972) defines racism as “any individual or collective act which denies blacks access to positive identity factors in American society” (p. 118). Rothenberg (1988) cites The United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1970, which states “Racism may be viewed as any attitude, action, or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of his or their color” (p. 20). Scholars in the field agree that racism may be an individual act or an institutional practice of a race of people over another to maintain control over the non-dominant group. The dominant group, first of all, has power, and secondly has the support of others in that group to ascribe negative connotations to the non-dominant group (Arthur, 2009; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Ware, 1981; White, 1984; Wyne, 1974). This issue of race and racism in the United States is so center stage that people from all walks of life have weighed in on how to combat what is so central in the American society. Wyne (1974) cites Dr. Cobbs, a black man and a psychiatrist who advocated for the discussion of race “in every class at every grade level” (p. 94).

The Anglophone West African woman is definitely aware of the fact that there are Blacks, Whites, Asians, Indians, Latinos and all the other groups that exist in the United States. They are also aware of the fact that non-Whites, especially Blacks, are viewed negatively in society. In short, they know that racism exists in the country and that because of the color of their skin they have been assigned to a group that has already been defined and assigned negative connotations—lazy, stupid, and dumb—to name a few. However, the Anglophone West African women refuse to accept these labels. They understand that they are in the category labeled “black,” but they understand that as Africans they have a different identity and must now redefine themselves in the society. Appiah (2008), in the foreword to Philcox’s 2008 translation *Black Skin, White Masks* of Fanon’s original *Peau noire, masques blancs*, states, “Fanon’s approach in *Black Skin, White Masks* focuses on the problems of identity created for the colonial subject by colonial racism; and on the consequent need to escape from these neuroses, which colonialism had produced” (p. ix). In the case of Anglophone West African women, I argue that whatever neuroses colonialism produced, these Anglophone West African women in the United States do not identify with these problems of identity. They face racism. But some of these women avow that they do not face racism; they face discrimination because of the fact that they are from Africa. They believe that the negative stereotypes portrayed of Africa in the media are responsible for this discrimination.

These women anchor their identity on their rich African heritage. Being proud of who they are helps them combat the negative stereotypes assigned to their place of origin,

the color of their skin and their gender. First of all, they stress the differences between who they are and how they are perceived in society. Arthur (2009) states, “These women reject the social labels associated with their alien, marginalized, and subordinate status by seeking to deconstruct their ethnicity, gender, and class attributes to stress social differences with mainstream American society” (p. 3). They hold on to their cultural heritage in one or more forms: keeping their family together; focusing on their education and that of their children; practicing their religion; dressing in their cultural attire, observing their ethnic rites; maintaining strong ties with family in their countries of origin; and striving for economic independence. Secondly, as women in the United States, these Anglophone West African women create ties with women from other parts of Africa, women in the Black diaspora, and women with whom they have similar social formations. Some of them may associate with groups and others with individuals from whatever background who will help them achieve their goals. I now describe the important aspects that contribute to the way the Anglophone West African women deconstruct the identities they were ascribed in their home countries and how they construct new identities to cope with their present situations in the United States.

### **Economic Power**

Having left home where these Anglophone West African women’s identities were hinged to the patriarchal system where women were considered only as daughters, wives, and mothers and where they were ascribed a lower status than their men folk, these women understand that their first priority in the United States is to gain economic power.

They use this economic power as leverage to redefine their identities. Arthur (2009)

captures this well when he says

In leaving West Africa and migrating abroad, the women gain economic power, some control, and a presence at the table of familial decision making over the appropriation of family resources in spite of their absence from home. Some of these women use this power to deconstruct the existing unequal gender structures at home through advocacy, resource utilization, and directives concerning the need to equalize the social relationships between men and women. (p. xi)

The need for economic power drives these women to be active in what has been termed the “brain drain,” “brain gain,” and “brain circulation.” We find highly educated and skilled professionals who could not gain employment in their field of expertise settle for low paying jobs in the service sector in the United States, thus contributing to the “brain drain” from their countries. These highly skilled workers are usually employed in the United States in blue collar jobs—the “brain gain.” Many of these women who cannot find work in their field go back to school for certification or a degree in a different area—the “brain circulation.” Some of the Anglophone West African Women who settle in the United States are professionals and pursue employment in their fields. Others work as domestic maids and care givers. Robinson (2010) explains

Africans are the best-educated group of immigrants coming to live in the United States. . . . We don’t notice because African immigrants, following the traditional pattern often have to start at the bottom, working at jobs that take advantage of only a fraction of these newcomers’ intelligence, experience, and ability. (p. 71)

He goes on to say, “Many African-born doctors, lawyers, engineers and other professionals are working quietly unnoticed as nurses, paralegals, draftsmen—and

security guards” (p. 73). Arthur (2009) opines, “West African refugee and immigrant women are resilient. They are highly motivated and assiduous, desirous of alleviating the poverty that confronts them and finding ways of improving upon their economic conditions” (p. 102). Many women from this part of the world where credit cards and bank loans were not accessible to them have learned to form groups, mini cooperatives, and save money together, *osusu*, that they take turns to collect. This helps them to have a large sum of money that they can use to buy items they cannot afford and would not otherwise have been able to save for.

Women from this part of the world are industrious. Although the men are usually touted as the “breadwinners,” these women have in some way subsidized the family income. They set up mini restaurants (food stalls), build kiosks to sell local or imported goods or dried foodstuffs, make dresses for other women and children, or give after-school tutorials. Arthur (2009) supports the industrious nature of these women.

Often relying on micro credits provided by extended family members to start their trading businesses, West African women are competent, economically savvy, and well organized in their trading operations. Living in societies in which women control the bulk of the sale and marketing of food and essential consumer commodities, the entrepreneurial acumen of West African women in carving economic niches is legendary. (p. 20)

The women who do not work in their professional field or take a lower position in another area, usually in the health care or service industry become creative. For example, instead of setting up food stalls, some of these women prepare their ethnic food for their family and may prepare extra that they offer to others from their countries, especially single men, who in turn offer goods or services. A lot of bartering goes on. Some women

may set up hair braiding salon or braid hair at home to bring in income. Others may trade in fabric and or make elaborate garments that they sell. Even older women who are brought to the United States by their kin or kith to help with the upbringing of children generate income by taking care of a few other children.

### **Family and Religion**

Two aspects of the lives of Anglophone West African women are family and religion and these are closely knit. Mikell (1997) uses the term “corporate” to define the model in traditional societies in Africa as it relates to many aspects of these societies. [This is the very opposite of what Americans define as corporate.] This “Ideological model,” she states, “acknowledges that individuals are part of many interdependent human relations (including family and community) in a supernaturally ordained fashion” (p. 10). Usually the family structure, whether based on monogamous marriages—which in many cases are in name only—or on polygamous marriages, is valued and respected. Njambi and O’Brien (2005) assert, “Regardless of how diversified family lifestyles become, the presence of a father, whether played by the biological father or father figure, is very much preferred and privileged over his absence” (p. 150).

When Anglophone West African women use the term “family,” they do so in the sense of their immediate family—father, mother, children—as well as extended family—nieces, nephews, cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents, in-laws, and whomever else they choose to include in their family structure. This reality of the family helps the grounding of these women regardless of where and in what circumstances they find themselves in the world. In a study by Chaudhry (2008) on Liberians in Staten Island, the author used

the method of Photovoice to help older Liberian refugees document their lives. The study documents that in spite of the refugees' situation in the United States, they were able to support family members in their country of origin. One of the participants' family members in Liberia is quoted as saying, "A family tree doesn't break, it bends" (p. 65). This signifies that even though the family member is far away in the United States, the separation does not mean a break in family ties. As a matter of fact, Anglophone West Africans' traditional systems and family relationships foster this responsibility. Arthur (2009) notes

Household and family resources are harnessed and collectivized to enable certain family members to be sponsored to travel abroad to attend school, find employment, and provide economic returns to strengthen the family and household economic circumstances. (p. 111)

In developing countries, the household is an "agency of economic production and allocates its resources in such a way as to maximize the productive capacities of the family unit" (p. 112). Women in Anglophone West Africa play a dominant role in maintaining the household and taking care of the family (DaVanzo, 1981; Schmink, 1984).

Although many women in present day West Africa limit childbearing to fewer children, two, three, and at most four, many women still have more.

In both rural and urban areas, some families still hold on to the belief that not all the children they have are going to survive beyond the age of five; thus, the imperative to have many children so that even if one, two, or more should die, families will still be left with children who survive. For some families, the decision to have many children is calculated to ensure that no matter the health problems that children face as they grow up, some of which may lead to death,

there will always be some children left at home, which mitigates the dishonor or shame that often comes with childlessness. (Arthur, 2009, pp. 168–169)

Furthermore, it is the expectation that children contribute to the economic health of the family by engaging in trade that will bring in money or taking on chores that free up the adults to work more. More importantly, children are the “social security” of their parents and other elderly kin whom they are expected to support. Respect for age is stressed. Even older siblings by a few years are respected by their younger siblings. This younger sibling, for example, would not just call an older sibling by his/her first name, but use a prefix before it.

The ultimate respect, in the Anglophone West African family is reserved for the deity. Every aspect of life is attributed to God. There are several phrases in different cultures which are translated as “This is the will of God.” Coming from this background, it is usually hard for Anglophone West African Women to integrate into the larger society in the United States and be able to practice their religion. These women usually define themselves as Muslim women, Christian women or just spiritual women, which can range from indigenous African religions to organized spiritual groups that sprung out of Christianity. Christians tend to have fewer problems than Muslims fitting in the society. Abdullah (2009) points out that West African immigrants living in Harlem who are Muslims, have emphasized their religion to define themselves. They created an impact on the society by building mosques. These immigrants, in redefining or defining themselves through their religious practices have helped their communities to consider aspects of life foreign to them—immigrants praying at set times during the day, wearing their traditional

clothes as opposed to conforming to western dress habits. These immigrants can define themselves when they are in great numbers. Many immigrants who are isolated tend to conform to western dress habits for fear of being harassed because of the way they dress. On the one hand, the immigrants knew how to assert themselves as a people with values and their ethnic way of life, not conforming to their host country's values; on the other hand, they had to negotiate the subtleties in the matter of race. "They must learn to negotiate an entirely new sense of what it means to be Black" (Abdullah 2009, p. 4).

Depending on where they live, they feel alienated to practice their religion, afraid to reveal that part of their identity for fear of repercussions from society or in areas where there are large numbers of immigrants with similar religious practices, they proudly practice their religion and develop their faith. For example, whereas the Muslim immigrants in Takougang's (2003) study proudly wear their African attire that Muslims traditionally wear in their home countries, the two women in Arthur's (2009) research gave up their traditional dress. "For Kendra and Lois, the alienation and trepidation associated with their religious status finally pressured them to give up appearing in public dressed in their Muslim attire" (p. 81). Whatever their situation, these women practice their religion by either affiliating with religious institutions that closely mirror their places of worship back home or they start their own worship centers in the United States. Their belief in a higher power grounds them in a foreign land.

### **Education**

The background of Anglophone West African Women fosters education. Education, traditional or western, has always been valued by West Africans. Western or

formal education was started by missionaries who spread their religious message through education. Jacobs (1996) acknowledges that missionary work in Liberia was different from that in other parts of Africa but that it was common in the continent for girls not to be educated. She says

Of course, missionary work in Liberia differed from mission activities elsewhere in Africa because there already existed in that country a small but influential group of Christianized Americo-Liberians. Smith was distressed particularly by the African practice of not educating girls. Accurately perceiving the need for a system of education for Liberian girls, she emphasized: 'There is so little attention paid to the education of girls; not a single high school for girls in the whole republic of Liberia. It is a great shame and a disgrace to the government.' (p. 94)

Jacobs's findings for Liberia are the same for Sierra Leone where, although missionary schools were started for both boys and girls, the reality, especially in the villages, was that girls were not given an equal opportunity with boys to be educated because of traditional values.

On the surface, the educational policy of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was gender neutral. The earliest proposals sent to the British government were for the establishment of educational institutions for 'children of both sexes.' Nonetheless, gender biases soon became evident in the implementation of the policy. The curriculum for girls gave priority to practical subjects such as home economics and needlework, in keeping with their projected future roles as wives and mothers. (Steady, 2006, p. 76)

There was, and still is, a thirst for education in Africa because everybody knows that only a good education is the passport to a better life. Formal education is a valued asset that increases one's chances in life and that of the family. Women who have been deprived of education would do all in their power to take advantage of any educational

opportunity offered them. This is why families would pull their resources together to send a child abroad to further her education.

It is with this background of education, or lack thereof, that Anglophone West African women come to the United States. Regardless of the level of education they had before coming or their status when they arrive in the United States—refugee, student, or professional—these women want to further their education and that of their families. They turn a deaf ear to the negative stereotypes of Blacks being underachievers. As Shelby (2005) points out, “These social illusions, like the belief that blacks are intellectually inferior, are socially reproduced through norms that are embedded in the culture” (p. 142). Robinson (2010), in discussing those labeled black in the United States, points out that “one size no longer fits all.” He goes on to state

We could talk about the need to increase black academic achievement in the poorest neighborhoods of Atlanta and the need to increase black academic achievement in the comfortable suburb of Lithonia, for example, but the problems aren't the same and the solutions wouldn't be the same. We could pretend not to notice how distinctive African immigrants are from native-born black Americans, or we could try to understand those differences and put them in context. (p. 20)

It is clear that whatever obstacles Anglophone West African women faced before they came to the United States, such obstacles are viewed as greater than any obstacle in the United States barring them and their families from getting a good education, their passport to the future.

### **Community**

Anglophone West African women in the United States think of community in terms of local, national, and transnational. They form communities based on their needs.

First of all, they associate with other women in their immediate families—mothers, sisters, grandmothers—and then they branch out to their extended family—aunts, cousins, and friends. They widen their circles to include other women and men from their country of origin and then from other countries in their region and finally from other regions of the world. When they form these communities it may be for cultural support, for work opportunities, for practicing their religion, for combating discrimination and prejudice or as safeguard for future needs. This point is supported by Arthur (2009)

For African immigrant women, the formation of a transnational immigrant identity centers on an important cultural and economic issue. This is symbolized by the need to create (or re-create) economically self-sustaining cultural communities comprised of networks of fellow émigrés who are joined by a common continental heritage and legacy. The common ground is to foster bonds of collective destinies and shared essence to ensure survival in the host society. The formation of transnational identities among African immigrant women tends to consist of three groups. These groups are: fellow immigrants from the immigrant country of origination, immigrants from other African countries domiciled in the same location, and, lastly, other people of Black African ancestry in the diaspora, especially American-born Blacks and others from South and Central America and the Caribbean Basin countries. (pp. 119–120)

Furthermore, they may form communities with individuals or groups outside their race.

### **Conclusion**

The situation in Anglophone West Africa after these countries gained independence from western powers has been fraught with problems. Even though many of these countries are rich in natural resources, their poor government structures, mismanagement of resources and wars have rendered them unstable and forced their nationals to leave the countries. Many of these nationals who flee their countries are women who seek asylum in other countries including the United States. The Anglophone

West African women, regardless of their status—refugee or voluntary immigrant—recreate their identities and create new identities while in the United States. They first of all seek economic power, and build communities to help them achieve their goals. Some of these goals are to improve the lives of their families, challenge gender differences and the system of patriarchy, and empower other women back in their home countries.

In the United States, these women reject the stereotypes that are thrust on them because of their skin color and redefine what it means to be black by emphasizing their rich cultural heritage. They view blackness from different lenses and do not buy into the cultural negative portrayal of Blacks in America. Their resilience helps them combat discrimination. For these women, their education is important, and they have a strong sense of family, which is undergirded by their religion or faith in a higher power.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

#### **Introduction**

In this study, I use narrative research, collecting and analyzing people's stories. In this chapter I devote a section to the topic of emotions in research and to my own perspective. Here, I audit my biases and subjectivity using my "subjective I's" (Peshkin, 1988). Then I define what I mean by "narrative research," and present and explain the key terms used in this methodology: *selectivity*, *silence*, *slippage*, *intertextuality* and the *collective subjective*. I explain how I recruited my participants, collected, transcribed and analyzed my data. Finally, I introduce my participants: Afafa and Effie from Ghana; Yata from Liberia; Iya from Sierra Leone; and Olu-Ola from Nigeria. These are not their real names. I gave them pseudonyms to protect their identity.

#### **Emotions in Narrative Research**

Emotions are an important part of the research process. Ezzy (2002) argues that the emotions of both interviewer and narrators play an important part of, and are indeed central to interviews. He discusses the theme of interviews as seen in light of being either "conquest" or "communion." Typically, when interviewers focus on the emerging themes or thought-out themes of their interviews, record the spoken words of the interviewees, and analyze the textual transcripts of the interviews, valuable aspects of the interviews are lost if they do not take into consideration their emotions as well as those of their

interviewees. Ezzy (2002) states, “Good interviews are not dominated by either the voice of the interviewee or the agendas of the interviewer. Rather, they feel like communion, where the tension between the research question and the experience of the interviewee is explored” (p. 164). I take inventory of my emotions before, during, and after the interviews. For as Kleinman and Copp (1993) note

Field researchers also know that their feelings somehow affect their research. But do fieldworkers admit that they have feelings? Do they learn to take their feelings into account as they analyze their data? We suspect most would answer “not often.” We doubt that others encourage fieldworkers to systematically reflect on their feelings throughout the research process. (p. 2)

Ezzy (2002) puts it succinctly when he says, “The aim is not to pretend that the researcher does not have preexisting theoretical ideas or emotional responses related to the research topic. Rather the aim is to engage theory and emotions reflexively so as to best hear or listen to what the research participants are saying” (p. 167). Kleinman and Copp (1993) quote Peshkin,

As Alan Peshkin (1988) discovered in his study of a fundamentalist Christian school, he could not be ‘the non-Christian scholar’ (p. 275). He found that ‘being Jewish . . . became the unavoidable salient aspect of [his] subjectivity’ (pp. 275–276). (p. 10)

In the next section I audit my emotions as they relate to the research topic. Being a black woman in the United States and carrying out research with women from my background is bound to bring my subjectivity into the research.

### **Myself as Researcher**

As a woman originating from Anglophone West Africa who has lived in, studied in or traveled within Africa, Europe, South America, Central America, and North America, I grapple with the concept of identity especially as a black woman in the United States. I have multiple aspects to my identity and I claim them all. I am a product of all of the experiences I have encountered during my sojourn in these parts of the world. My formative years were in Sierra Leone and so I have always thought of myself as a Sierra Leonean, as an African. My stay in Leeds, England, as a graduate student did not afford me the opportunity to experience the culture as it would someone growing up or working within that society. I considered myself an African student in England. Also, the five years that I spent in Berlin, Germany, with my family gave me different lenses with which I experienced this society. Furthermore, being an African woman in Germany, I experienced my identity not just as an African woman, but also as a black woman. I started life in the United States coming from Africa by way of Europe with my “baggage” or “cultural capital” or both, depending on my lenses or the lenses through which I am viewed. Of course, I was aware of the fact that out of Sierra Leone, I was “a minority” in the United States. The assumption was easily made that I was African American until I spoke. I was quickly reclassified—Black with an accent! I was often asked the question, “Where are you from?” And almost always, this question would be preceded by “You have an accent!”

My identity in the United States was no longer *Ausländerin* (foreigner), *Afrikanerin*, (African woman), as it was in Germany, or African American, if I did not

speaking, but black immigrant. Still a member of the minority (out of Africa), I am now at the bottom of racial order in the United States as Bonilla-Silva (2006) conceptualizes the line-up in the emerging racial order. His three categories of “Whites,” “Honorary Whites,” and “Collective Black” (in descending order) has as the last but one subgroup under “Collective Black” the group of “New West Indian and African immigrants” (p. 180).

Speaking of African immigrants, Arthur notes that they experience issues such as “family formation, finding employment, navigating immigration requirements, adjusting to life in the United States, and the negotiation of racial, ethnic, class, and gender identities” (2009, p. 6). As a western-educated African woman, am I qualified to speak for Anglophone West African women who come from different countries and span the continuum of tribe, educational background, socio-economic status, to name a few? Probably not. But as a black woman, I can speak for them because level of education, country of origin or tribal affiliation does not differentiate one black woman from another when it comes to the issue of blackness in the United States.

Any researcher, I argue, decides on a research topic based on some personal, subjective experience or curiosity. The research is driven by some injustice that the researcher feels should be addressed or she may be seeking fame, jumping on a bandwagon, or motivated by monetary compensation, among many others. All research, in my view, starts with the subjective. It is, therefore, not by happenstance that I became interested in identity issues, specifically blackness. As I said earlier on, I am a foreign-

born American. I am therefore mindful of my background and biases of which I have to take inventory before embarking on my research.

For this research, I plan to use a combination of Peshkin's (1988), Casey's (1993), and Riessman's (1993) methodologies. Riessman (1993) refers to this as "locating myself," and Peshkin (1988) identifies his subjectivity in what he refers to as his "subjective I's." Peshkin (1988) asserts that subjectivity is inevitable and argues that it is important for researchers to be aware of their subjectivity and how it may be shaping their research and its outcomes. He observes, "One's subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17). Peshkin explains that he stumbled on his own subjectivity in an earlier work and then decided that he would, in subsequent writings, seek out his subjectivity and be aware of "its enabling or disabling potential" while collecting his data. Peshkin made me aware of my "biases" that may inadvertently encroach on my research. The fact that I chose to collect narratives from women from Anglophone West Africa, an area from which I come, documents my first bias. In discussing blackness in the United States, I could have collected stories from women from South Africa or from the Caribbean. In line with Peshkin's subjective I's, I identify the following as my subjective I's: (a) the Foreign-born American I; (b) the Listener I; (c) the Traveler I; (d) the Sentimental/Nostalgic I, and (e) the Immigrant/American citizen I.

### **The Foreign-born American I**

Being originally from Sierra Leone, an Anglophone West African country, and having lived in other countries as a black woman, I can relate to issues of blackness out of Africa and in the United States. As a black woman in the United States, I have "put

on” the culture of my new country while still maintaining my African roots. I am therefore able to see through different lenses. This is how I describe my *Foreign-born American I*. This is an asset to my research because I am within the cultural framework of meaning and I may recognize the context as it relates to the women I interview. The lenses through which they see the United States are perhaps similar to the lenses through which I see the United States. Yet, these lenses are different from those of the children born to Anglophone West African women out of Africa. Do these women, my participants, see their time here as a “sojourn” and therefore not bothered about how they are defined in society?

### **The Listener I**

As I listen to these women who have left “home,” their “permanent residence,” to study in the United States, I catch glimpses of how they settle in the country. Do they feel disconnected from their home community? Do they see themselves as people in transit? Do they feel welcome and “at home” in the United States? I believe that I am a good listener. I particularly like listening to stories. My love for oral histories began as a child when during the rainy season we would gather together and my mother would tell stories as we munched on roasted corn on the cob and roasted peanuts. I always loved to hear the call/response. My mother would give the call *Il* and we the gathered audience would respond *Aw*. Then she would continue with the first sentence of each story, *wan day yah* . . . meaning “Once upon a time . . .” When my mother later told my children these popular folktales that I had heard as a little girl, I once more enjoyed listening to them. I

had to identify *The Listener I* before I conduct my interviews. I knew I would be able to listen to my narrators' stories without interrupting them.

### **The Traveler I**

My love for traveling and seeing new places and people has encouraged me to travel to and within many countries. This has developed my interest in different cultures. I love meeting people from different parts of the world. I believe that hearing about other countries gives me the incentive to travel to these places and experience firsthand what I hear from other people. So, the *Traveler I* is ongoing. How has traveling to another country, especially one that is so different from the countries of origin of my interviewees, impacted their lives? What new understandings have they developed as black women? I remember when I was in Sierra Leone and singing Christmas hymns such as "In the bleak mid-winter" in a packed church with fans blowing to cool the congregation from the sweltering heat of packed bodies. We sang those hymns without having any frame of reference as to what the words meant. It was only when I experienced my first winter in Leeds, England, that I understood some of the phrases in that hymn—"earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone." How can someone from a tropical climate understand the word "snow" without experiencing it? I learned the words to the song, then sang, "snow has fallen, snow on snow" and understood the concept years later when I traveled to England. The understanding of the elements, I must say, ranks lower than that of being black in the United States.

### **The Sentimental/Nostalgic I**

This brings me to the last but one of the subjective I's that I have so far identified, the *Sentimental/Nostalgic I*. I am nostalgic for "home." I contemplated before embarking on this study that listening to women who come from the same part of the world as me would bring back memories of sights, smells and sounds that I may have forgotten and some of which no longer exist in the country due to the devastating wars that were waged in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. This nostalgia for the past remains just that.

### **The Immigrant/American Citizen I**

As a naturalized American citizen who has decided to stay in the United States, I realize how complex my identity as a black woman has become. Whereas black women who plan to go back to their home countries in Africa may see themselves as sojourners here, and think that the problems of African Americans have little to do with them, I don't. I consider those problems as *my* problems too, living my life as a black woman in America.

I do not share the culture of African American women, and this frustrates me at times when I do not understand their perspectives. I have to rely on long-standing friends to help me understand and through honest dialogues, I begin to understand points of view that I would not have fathomed had I not taken the time to tease this out. I recall an experience not long after I arrived in the United States. I had this feeling of being treated coldly when the African Americans in the group that I had joined for dinner at a conference heard me speak. I felt ignored the whole evening, not because of my skin color, but probably because I did not share their "ethnic culture" and could not relate to

their topics of conversation and understood language. I tried several times to get into the conversation but to no avail. That evening, I vowed to make friends with African American women. Some of those friendships have lasted and others have fallen by the wayside.

As a woman from Anglophone West Africa, I do not want to be biased in favor of what Peshkin (1988) referred to as his “Ethnic-maintenance I.” As a naturalized American citizen, one who has made friends with people from different countries, races, cultures, and backgrounds, I do identify with Peshkin’s “E-Pluribus-Unum I.” However, I do not want one to overshadow the other because both are valid and both are parts of my identity as I strive to live in a global society. I may, in auditing my biases for a future study, identify my “Bridge between cultures I.”

### **Defining Narrative Research**

Casey (1995) uses the term narrative research “as an overarching category for a variety of contemporary research practices including the collection and analysis of autobiographies and biographies . . .” (p. 211). In present day society, everybody seems to want to tell their stories. The Internet has provided this medium through Facebook, blogs, My Space, You Tube, Twitter, and other social media for people to tell their stories. Many scholars (Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Riessman, 1993) agree on the commonalities of qualitative research, specifically narrative research, which take into consideration the theoretical frameworks, story-collecting techniques, recruiting of narrators, and interpreting and analyzing the stories collected.

Narrative research is especially appropriate to my study since my narrators come from Africa where there is a strong tradition of oral literature—storytelling and transmitting wisdom through oral methods. The fact that I love listening to stories and to interact with people would make me enjoy my research. In my doctoral degree program I took a course in statistics only because it was required. I do not like crunching numbers, which was mainly what the course was about. I did the work just because I had to do it, not because I enjoyed doing it. As Josselson (1993, p. xv) writes, “Narrative . . . has intuitive appeal to people who become weary of variables and the quantification of the Positivistic approach” (as cited in Casey, 1995, p. 212). I agree with her observation.

I “give ear” as opposed to “give voice” to my narrators. Casey (1993) states in *I Answer With My Life*, “I contend that interviewers need to respect the authenticity and integrity of narrators’ stories, to see them as subjects creating their own history rather than as objects of research” (pp. 231–232). In addition to seeing narrators as creating their own history, I believe that “giving voice” presupposes that the researcher is in a superior position—the giver. Riessman (1993) makes the point that “we cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret” (p. 8). I “hear the voices” of my narrators, which I record and interpret.

I chose my methodology based on what I would like to find out from my study participants. I would like to find out not just what my participants say, but also their emotions and their body language as they tell their stories. Riessman states that “(b)ecause the approach gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity” (1993, p. 5). So I use the widest possible

question to allow my narrators the space to construct their life stories: I ask them to “tell me the story of your life.”

### **Selectivity, Silence, Slippage, and Intertextuality**

After recording and transcribing the life stories, I became ready to analyze them using the concepts outlined by Casey (1993, 1995).

*Selectivity* is what the narrator chooses to tell the interviewer. In the section where the interviewer uses an open-ended prompt such as “Tell me the story of your life,” the narrator chooses those aspects of her life that she shares. Even when the interviewer asks specific questions, the narrator only shares aspects she would like to that are connected with that question, if at all she chooses to address the question.

*Silence* is what the narrator omits from the narrative. Narrators who have had traumatic experiences during childhood may choose to omit giving information about their childhood. People who have witnessed atrocities during wartime usually omit these memories they do not want to recall and narrate.

*Slippage* has to do with the contradictions in the individual’s story. There are incidents where a narrator may contradict herself during the course of the interview.

*Intertextuality* helps the researcher with text analysis. Comparisons are made between the individuals’ stories and also within an individual’s story. These comparisons will be necessary as I compare the stories of my participants who come from different countries.

### **Collective Subjective**

The concept of the “collective subjective” (Gramsci, 1980), as it relates to narrative research has been expressed differently by scholars. A few of these expressions are “interpretive community” (Fish, 1980), “social dialects” (Bakhtin, 1981), and “general cultural repertoire” (Popular Memory Group, 1982). Casey (1995) contends that “in the process of articulating a common political discourse, individual isolation is overcome, and identity is created in community” (p. 222). Apart from the fact that each of my narrators is telling her own story, it is true that she is also telling the story of many others from her country with whom she shares a cultural framework of meaning. Furthermore, my narrators from different countries with similar backgrounds use a common vocabulary through which they convey shared beliefs. For example, they used the words, “sassy” and “sassiness” when referring to West African women; “instilled” when referring to what their parents taught them; and “obedient” and “submissive” when referring to the expectations for women in their societies.

### **Cultural Framework of Meaning**

I agree with Casey that “(e)very narrative is highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity” (1995, p. 234). Whereas the women in my study who did not experience wars in their countries were understandably silent on wars in Anglophone West Africa, the two women whose lives were impacted by the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone did mention these wars, but they did not give much detail, presumably because of their traumas.

When the participants in my study spoke about the women in their societies, they had a lot in common—respecting their elders; taking care of other people’s children; teaching their children, especially their daughters, how to cook; and looking out for each other. I share this cultural framework of meaning. As my participants spoke, sayings from my background came to mind. For example, the popular saying, “It takes a village to raise a child,” is an African saying that has an equivalent in different societies in Anglophone West Africa.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

I recruited my participants by word of mouth. I asked my colleagues at several universities, my former students, and people in general from Anglophone West Africa to refer me to Anglophone West African women studying at colleges and universities here in the United States. When I was referred to a woman, I contacted her by phone or e-mail and introduced myself following the script I had prepared when I applied to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to use human subjects in my research. I introduced myself and told her that I was a student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I went on to explain that as part of the requirements for my Ph.D. at the University, I am required to write a dissertation and that I would like to do narrative research, specifically personal narratives of Anglophone West African women in the United States. I told her that I would like to interview her and record her story. I went on to assure her that she could tell me anything she chose to tell me and that I would listen without interrupting her. If I needed to ask her specific questions on any aspect of

her narrative or questions on issues that I think of, I will do so after her narrative. I informed her that the interview would take between one and three hours at one or more meetings. I assured her that she was free to opt out of the interview at any time. Furthermore, I gave her the information on whom to contact should she have any questions or concerns with the research.

I eventually recruited five women who come from four of the five Anglophone West African countries—two from Ghana, one from Sierra Leone, one from Liberia and one from Nigeria. Three of them currently attend an elite private university and two attend public universities.

After setting up each interview by phone, e-mail, or text message, I explained the IRB consent form to my participants and the fact that I would ask them to sign it before conducting the interview. I assured them that I would not reveal their identity. I asked each of them to choose the venue for the interview because I wanted them to feel relaxed when they told their stories. I met with these women at a place of their choosing. Two of the women chose to meet with me at a Starbuck's café and at a local patisserie close to their respective universities; two invited me to interview them at their homes, and one met me at a quiet location on a university campus.

## **The Life Stories**

### **Collecting the Data**

When I met with each woman, I reiterated what I had told her before. This time, I gave her the IRB consent form to read, sign, and date it. At the time of the interview, I simply identified each woman according to the order in which the interviews were

conducted—Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, and so on. Later on, I gave them typical names for their countries as pseudonyms. As is common in most parts of Africa, the names I chose were significant because of the woman’s position in the family, the day in which she was born or it simply had to do with at least one characteristic of the woman. In one instance, I gave a short form of the name.

At the beginning of every interview, I asked my interviewee to tell me the story of her life. I allowed my interviewee to speak without interrupting her. After each uninterrupted narration, I asked the woman to expand on or address specific topics I had identified as the main themes for my research: women, race, education, and friends. I recorded her story while I listened and observed her expressions, body language, and tone of voice. I audited my feelings, as well as the surroundings as she told me her story. As Riessman (1993) puts it, I was “attending” to the experience as she was “telling” me her story. At the first opportunity after the interview, usually when I got back to my car, I spent some time writing down my observations. I also wrote down my inner feelings, such as when I agreed with her or felt disappointed that she did not speak for as long as I had hoped. This jotting down of my observations continued even long after the interview. I would jot down whatever I thought of that was connected with the research and the data I was collecting. Kleinman and Copp (1993) suggest that fieldworkers write analytic notes which they can use as a basis for later drafts.

By writing analytic notes we ultimately save time. Analytic notes are minidrafts that we can use as a basis for later drafts. Staying in the habit of analyzing the data as we go along might also free us from such problems as writer’s block or reader’s block as we will continue the process of analysis rather than face a new alien task, as qualitatively different from what we have done all along. Hence

taking the process approach from start to finish may actually shorten, rather than lengthen, the project. (p. 26)

After I had listened to and recorded each woman's story, I then asked her to speak some more on aspects of her story if I was not clear on what she had told me and then I asked her the specific interview questions I had identified for my research. In answering these questions, the woman elaborated on other areas she had talked about in her uninterrupted narrative or introduced other subjects she wanted to talk about.

### **Transcribing the Data**

I transcribed each interview as close after the interview as I possibly could. Listening to the interviews soon after they were recorded helped me to recollect the emotions and body language that I observed, which I noted. Also, this provided me ample opportunity to be familiar with my text, the women's stories. One of the difficulties I encountered was that of punctuation. Van Maanen (1988) recognizes this difficulty when he states "Crunching text requires text to first be put in crunchable form" (p. 17). How do I account for breaks in a narrative? How do I capture the non-verbal language in the transcript? Do I write them in parentheses? For example, (heaves a sigh). Even a laugh could be ironic. So, just saying she laughed or she chuckled does not adequately capture what was going on. When one of the women kept repeating a phrase in a sing-song manner, I had to transcribe each repetition because it meant something.

### **Analyzing the Data**

As I analyzed the data, I looked for common themes in the women's uninterrupted narratives. I also searched for sub themes under the themes of my prompts—the questions

I asked them on education, women, friends and race. I looked for common patterns, inconsistencies, and in short, I looked to see how selectivity, silence, slippage, and intertextuality were manifested in the narratives.

As Mishler (1991) noted, “How we arrange and rearrange the [interview] text in light of our discoveries is a process of testing, clarifying and deepening our understanding of what is happening in the discourse” (p. 277). My analysis of these women’s stories will no doubt play a big part in the final product of this research. As I analyzed the text, the transcribed interviews of my study participants, I found out that I had to rearrange sections in order to give prominence to what these women considered important or to capture their strong emotions or passions.

First of all, I used line numberings in the individual narratives so as to be able to quickly identify the beginning and ending of particular subject matter. For example, one of my narrators spoke about her family in several sections of her interview. Using this method, I was able to jot down all the lines in her narrative referring to family. I then made a chart with columns and rows. I used the landscape version of the Microsoft Word Document and labeled my columns from left to right starting with the column for themes, then for each of my narrators and finally for comments.

As I read each narrative and identified a theme, I wrote the name of the theme in a row under the first column on the left—the theme column. I then wrote the numbers for the lines that the particular theme was talked about throughout each woman’s narrative in the column under her name. I also made notes under the comments column, for example,

the emphasis a narrator put on the subject, my feelings, or something I wanted to cross reference.

Having identified the themes, I color coded them in the narratives. For example, the sections in which the women spoke about their families were highlighted in blue in all of the narratives. I did this for both parts of the interview; the part where the women responded to my prompt, “Tell me the story of your life,” and to the specific questions I asked them.

After color coding sections with identical subject matter I was able to work with each section simultaneously on the computer. Later on, I printed out the narratives in color so that I could have the hard copies lined up in front of me rather than going back and forth on the electronic version. I was able to identify sub themes, patterns of speech, and the features of narrative research, which I looked for. I will discuss these findings in the next chapter, Chapter IV—Findings.

### **Introduction of Participants**

*Afafa* is from Ghana and is in her early twenties. She started off her narration in a chronological way identifying her country, her tribe and her position in her family. She then spent the rest of her uninterrupted narration on her education in Ghana where she completed secondary school (high school) at a boarding school where she made some of her close friends. She came to the United States to further her education. “And I took a lot of leadership roles while there and was really focused on my academics and several of my classmates, including myself, did kind of migrate from Ghana to here to go to college.” Her parents and some of her other family members reside in Ghana. She has

older siblings here in the United States and she goes home to Ghana twice every year. She does this by applying for grants to go home and work. She ended her uninterrupted narrative by saying, “That’s the story of my life.”

*Effie*, the second of the two Ghanaian women that I interviewed, was also born and raised in Ghana. She is in her late twenties or early thirties. She has two sisters. She started her narrative with a brief statement about her parents and siblings, her position in the family as the third daughter, and then went on to speak about her education. She attended a Catholic elementary school, then a secondary school for academically gifted children from all over the continent. This was a boarding school. She only left Ghana for the United States to further her education at the tertiary level. She took pre med courses while at college. She finished her undergraduate degree at a prestigious women’s college and then spent a few years working while she was deciding what she really wanted to do and have as a career. This took her a few years out of academia and she made up her mind not to go into medicine for a number of reasons; most important of all was the high cost of student loans that she would have incurred as a medical student. By the time she went back to her studies, she had decided to give up her dream of becoming a medical doctor and to now pursue a Ph.D. in research in a scientific field. She has been in the United States for over a decade. Her parents are in Ghana, but her two sisters, whom she gets to see often, are here in the United States. She ended her uninterrupted narrative by telling me that she has lived in the United States for almost 13 years and that she believes that one has to spread one’s wings to get to know different people and different

cultures because “that’s one of the things that makes America what it is—that mix of different people and different backgrounds and all of that stuff.”

Afafa and Effie are both Ghanaians who probably went to the same boarding school “in one of the cities adjacent to Accra, capital of Ghana.” They are both privileged and they are aware of it. Effie spoke about the fact that her mother was not a stay-at-home mom like the mothers of many of her friends. She said that they always had people helping them at home doing the cooking and cleaning since both her parents were “working professionals.” Both Afafa and Effie knew that they would travel out of the country for their university education and would go to England or most likely to the United States since they already had sisters in the country.

*Yata*, the Liberian woman in my study, spoke the least of all the women when I asked her to tell me the story of her life. She started off by telling me where she was born and then gave me her birth date (she is now in her early twenties) and her position in her family and went on to say, “I was born in a terrible country [Liberia]. That’s all I got to say.” She then went on to state that her parents brought her to the United States so that she could go to college. Her major is “social work” and she is “specializing in children, youth and families with an intention to do family law.” She is the oldest of four children. After these pieces of basic information, she said, “So, I don’t know what else to talk about. So you can ask me questions and I will tell you.”

Yata comes from a war-torn country. She was definitely affected by the war, which made her family flee to another country before coming back to Liberia when she was about seven years old. She did not say which country she was in. I am speculating

that she may have been in Sierra Leone, a neighboring country to which many Liberians fled during the war in their country but returned home when war broke out in Sierra Leone as well. She spoke of having witnessed atrocities in her country. She realized that she was one of the lucky ones to have had both parents to take care of her and made sure that she went to school and got an education. Even though things were terrible in the country, she was one of the privileged few who had parents that were able to bring her over to the United States.

*Iya*, from Sierra Leone, is the youngest of the women I interviewed. She is in her late teens. She started her narrative by giving her age and then went on to talk about the fact that when the war broke out in Sierra Leone her parents got her and her brothers out of the country to a neighboring country and from there they came to the United States. She was not yet five years old when she left Africa. She stated that her parents were only able to get visas because of the type of jobs they had. They settled in the northeast of the United States with a member of her extended family for a short while before moving to a place of their own. She attended a private, Lutheran, elementary school. She says, "It was very traditional with uniforms, a church card, you had to get a church card, you have to get it signed by your pastor, every Sunday. It was very strict and my mom absolutely loved that!" Religion plays a big part in her household. She spoke at great length about her education. At the suggestion of a guidance counselor in her elementary school she enrolled in a program designed to give minority students an opportunity to excel. Even though her parents were protective of her, being the only girl in the family and the youngest of her siblings, the parents allowed her to leave home at 14 to attend a boarding

high school in another state because of her chances of getting a good education. She states

I left home at 14 and at first my parents were not agreed with this at all, but then they realized that these schools were better there, not only academically challenging, but where you are going to experience a way different cultural setting you're going to be exposed to a lot of different people. It is very helpful you have amazing connections that you are not going to be usually exposed to.

She spent the best part of her uninterrupted narrative (the section where I asked her to tell me the story of her life without asking questions or commenting on anything she said) on her educational path and the great success she has had because she worked hard and focused on her education. She was able to get internships with reputable international companies every year since she was in high school. Her mother would always remind her to keep her focus on her education. She said that she was lucky to get “an amazing financial package” from the university she now attends.

Moving from the northeast United States to the southeast was a welcome relief for her because having lived for four years away from home, she had become independent and did not want to go back home. She is now focusing on educational policies for minority groups in inner cities. This is very important to her. She went on to say that there are scholarships available to minority students but that “no one knows about them.” She was fortunate to have had this information because she attended a boarding school where she had the opportunity to network with “amazing people and talk to the best and brightest teachers in all of the country.” Iya ended her uninterrupted narrative by saying, “So, what else do you want to know?”

Iya seems to be the most elite in the group. She spoke of experiencing “a way different cultural setting,” “amazing connections,” “an amazing financial package” for university, of having “the best and brightest teachers in all the country,” and also the cost of attending her high school was much more than the cost of tuition at her elite private university. She attributes this to her hard work. Also, the background of her parents paved the way to this success.

*Olu-Ola* is Nigerian and came to the United States as a child. She said that she does not remember much of her childhood in Nigeria. What stuck in her memory was waking up one morning and being told by her parents that she and her sisters would be going to the United States to further their education. The parents brought them to a city in the southeast of the United States and left them with an aunt and uncle. The parents would visit them during this time until they thought they had to take over the parenting of their children and came over to the United States to stay. *Olu-Ola* felt that this was because “we were not receiving the proper training, the proper guidance as we would have if they were here.” She added that the aunt and uncle let them do whatever they wanted to do and acted however they wanted to act, even staying out till late playing with the neighborhood kids and going to bed whenever they wanted to. Her parents are pastors who wanted their children to grow up in a “strong Christian household.” She spoke of having had a hard time in school as a second grader who looked and spoke differently from the other children and was criticized by her peers. She then started to behave like the other children, the American children. She spoke about probably being the only African in the school and she did not at this time embrace her culture. She said, “Back in

middle school, elementary school, high school, I was probably one of, the only African, talk less of Nigerian, in the school. So I didn't really associate with the culture. I was embarrassed to say I was African because no one could relate to me." It was not until she started university that she started learning about herself and her culture. She ended her narration by saying, "And so, and that's pretty much it. I don't really have more."

Olu-Ola is similar to Iya in the sense that she too came to the United States as a child. She is also privileged, but not in the elite group as Iya. It struck me from her narration that she was told by her parents at the age of seven that she would be going to the United States to further her education. Her parents must have been in a privileged class in Nigeria to be able to take their three daughters out of the country even before they started high school. Olu-Ola, however, attended public school and is now attending a public university.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter gives the findings of my study. I set out to study Anglophone West African women in the United States and how they come to understand blackness in America and their identity through their race, gender, education and family. I interviewed five women from Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

Section I documents the narratives of my research participants in response to my interview prompt, “Tell me the story of your life.” I termed the narratives from this prompt, “the uninterrupted narratives.” Each woman was allowed to speak for as long as she wanted to without my interrupting her. There was a clear beginning and an end to each narrative. All my narrators started by giving me some personal information from the following list: her name, date of birth, country of origin, clan, tribe, family, and her position in the family. She also gave a clear signal of the end of her narrative, for example, “so that’s it,” “what else do you want to know?” “So, I don’t know what else to talk about. So you can ask me questions and I will tell you,” “And so, and that’s pretty much it. I don’t really have more.” The themes that emerged from these uninterrupted narratives are family, education, and identity.

Section II summarizes the responses my participants gave to the interview questions I asked them after they had told me the story of their lives. These questions

were phrased in a simple way so as not to steer the women's responses in a particular direction. Each of the questions started with "What are your views on . . . ?" The questions were on education, women, race and friendships. From the solicited narratives I collected, I identified subthemes. For example, on the theme of education, the following subthemes emerged: The importance of education; influence of family on education; views on education in the United States; educated people's responsibility to help others get an education; problems arising from the lack of education; and educating a woman versus educating a man.

Section Three discusses the features of narrative research observed in the narratives. I noted the features of silence, slippage, selectivity, intertextuality and "cultural framework of meaning," in the narratives I collected. I discuss instances of these features, and I give my conclusions on the chapter.

### **Themes from the Prompt: "Tell Me the Story of Your Life."**

#### **Family**

All the women spoke about their family in their uninterrupted narratives. The importance of kin is a typical African value (Abdullah, 2009; Nsonwu, 2008; Robinson, 2010). Iya, from Sierra Leone, spoke a lot about her family. She is the youngest of three children. Of all the women I interviewed, she gave the most detail about her family. Her two brothers are eight years and five years older than she is. Her parents took them out of Sierra Leone when the war started. [In this regard, this family is unlike those in Nsonwu's (2008) study, who did not have the resources to leave.] Even though she was three years old at the time, she remembers going to another country in West Africa with

her family before they got visas to travel to the United States. Her mother works for an international organization. Iya not only spoke about her immediate family (mother, father, and brothers) but also of her aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents. She informed me that when her immediate family came to the United States other members of her family, on her dad's side, went to Europe. Her family keeps in touch with other members of the family in England and in Sierra Leone. The elites in these war-torn countries have the ability to leave (however involuntary).

She says that they are a religious family and that they go to church every Sunday. Iya's mother insists that the family celebrate the culture of their ethnic group and the mother sometimes travels to Sierra Leone. She spoke about her mother building a house for her grandmother in Sierra Leone and supporting other family members. Her parents once traveled to England with her and her brothers to attend the wedding of one of her cousins. She keeps in touch with her family in Sierra Leone and regularly connects with one of her aunts through Skype. From her descriptions, one can tell that this is a close-knit family.

Yata's reference to her family in her uninterrupted narrative is very brief. She said, "I am the oldest of four. My parents brought me to America so I can go to college." Unlike the other women in my study, she did not elaborate on her siblings. There is no information on their gender or where they are. Did they come to America as well? Are they in their home country? These are questions left unanswered for me because Yata chose not to give details and I had to respect her privacy. Of all the women I interviewed, she spoke the least about her family.

In Effie's uninterrupted narrative, it is interesting to note that when she mentions her family, it is always in relation to education. This may be because all the members of the family hold at least one degree. She has two older sisters who hold degrees; one is on a fellowship in the medical field and the other has just completed law school. Both of them are here in the United States. Her parents also hold degrees. Her mother's undergraduate degree is in history and her father's in economics. Both parents live in Ghana and work outside the home in the banking and insurance sectors. One of Effie's older sisters was already in medical school when she, Effie, informed the family that she wanted to go into research instead of becoming a doctor and specializing in one of the medical fields. She explained that her family felt that she should become a doctor or be in a profession in the medical field. "They were like, 'well, if you want to do research, why don't you go become a pharmacist?'" She went on to say that her older sister in medical school was already biased towards that field and supported the parents. Effie pointed out here that "In Ghana, if you are in the sciences, when you are good at it then you become a doctor." This way of thinking is common in Anglophone West Africa where studies in the sciences should lead to a profession as a doctor or a dentist.

The structure of Olu-Ola's family is similar to that of Effie's—the parents and their three daughters. Olu-Ola does not give details about her siblings, she only mentions them. She also acknowledges her extended family, an aunt and an uncle with whom she and her sisters stayed when they first came to America and the parents had to travel back and forth between Nigeria and the United States. She mentioned that she and her sisters "were not receiving the proper training, the proper guidance" from this aunt and uncle

who let them do whatever they wanted to do and behaved as they wanted to. It is obvious that the aunt and uncle had a different philosophy from that of Olu-Ola's parents when it comes to raising children. This aunt and uncle may have been young and not have children of their own or not as strict as Olu-Ola's parents who were both pastors. However, I was only left with these speculations of why they allowed their nieces to do as they pleased and let them stay out late playing with the neighborhood kids when they were supposed to have been studying or in bed. I did not ask questions or probe because this is what this woman chose to tell me.

Afafa introduces herself in relation to her family. She says, "I am the first and only child of my parents. However, I do have several house siblings." Listening to her, the first thought that came to my mind was that these "house siblings" that she mentioned were her "adopted" brothers and sisters living with the family. It is very common in Africa for a family to "adopt" or take into their homes other children primarily to help with household chores in exchange for educating them and giving them a better life. Oruboloye (1981) alludes to this when she states, "Children are still frequently sent from rural areas to live with their relatives in urban areas for assistance with their education" (p. 31). However, Afafa's house siblings *were* her siblings. She went on to say

On my father's side, I have four siblings, a sister and three brothers, two of whom are twins. But those are my father's children from his previous marriage. His ex-wife passed away before he married my mother. My mother also has a son who is older than me from a previous marriage and I was their child from their marriage.

She thought that they were all “full siblings,” but later found out that they were “half-siblings,” and then identified herself and her position in the sibling hierarchy. “So, that makes me the sixth born, the fifth born, the second born, the first born and also the last born.” And concluded, “I know it’s kind of complicated, but I am all those things.” She did not know about the family dynamics until she was an adult when someone inadvertently talked to her about this at the wedding of one of her sisters. She rationalized it in this way, “I guess it is some sort of African culture of silence when it comes to telling children about ‘adult decisions,’” and informed me that the family member who gave her this unsolicited “family secret” paid dearly for it for several years.

The family structure of these women in my study mirrors the western “nuclear” family unit with parents and their children, but the extended family –aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews and others—is also highly valued. In Africa, there are other family structures, such as, polygamous families, and the unfamiliar or unknown family structure in West Africa stemming from the woman-woman marriage, (Njambi & O’Brien 2005) not mentioned in these narratives.

### **Education**

All of the women spoke about their education in their uninterrupted narratives. This was inevitable being that in recruiting them I had specified that these interviews were requested as part of my dissertation for the Ph.D. Also, they are all currently attending universities in the United States. Furthermore, and more importantly, these women all said they came to the United States for their education.

Three of the women, who are currently attending elite universities in the United States, went to boarding schools for their secondary school/high school education either back in their home country or here in the United States. Attending boarding schools set them on a path for educational success. They also stressed the fact that while at boarding school they took leadership roles.

Afafa, for example, when talking about her boarding school in Ghana says, “The four years at that school were very good. I took a lot of leadership roles while there and was really focused on my academics and several of my classmates and myself did migrate from Ghana to here to go to college.” Effie who also attended a boarding school in Ghana for “academic gifted kids” from all over Africa said that after being in that international high school, “a lot of people actually ended up going abroad to do their college education, mainly in the U. S.” These women were probably at the same boarding international high school. Graduates from this boarding high school were very likely to continue their education at universities abroad. This boarding high school prepared students from different backgrounds for success in life.

Iya was already in the United States when she went to boarding school. She attended a private, religious elementary school before going to a boarding high school. At this elementary school, minority students were encouraged to apply for a program that “target[s] minority students in the inner city area and they train them to go to independent boarding schools.” She said, “So, I decided to go to boarding for my high school experience.” She attended a boarding school in another state because the boarding schools there were “not only academically challenging, but you were going to experience

a way different cultural setting, you're going to be exposed to a lot of different people, it is very helpful you have *amazing connections* that you are not usually going to be exposed to." Iya's boarding school in the United States is similar in mission to Afafa and Effie's boarding school(s) in Ghana. They prepare their students not only for academic success but also for professional exposure. Just like the women who attended boarding school in Ghana, Iya also mentioned being in leadership positions and attending leadership conferences.

When Iya talks about her educational experiences, she also talks about the educational experiences of her brothers and she feels that they did not have the opportunities she has had because they went to public schools and she attended a private boarding school. As a result of this, she is passionate about sharing information on opportunities for minority students.

The other two women in my study did not go to boarding school. The mention of education in Yata's uninterrupted narrative was brief. She said, "My parents brought me over to America so I can go to college," and then went on to tell me in a sentence what she was studying. Olu-Ola also said that her parents brought her to the United States at age seven for an education. She said, "One day, I woke up . . . I was seven years old and my parents said 'you are going to America to further your studies.'" After attending elementary, middle and high school where she believed she was the only African in the school, she went on to a public university.

## **Identity**

Each woman in my study has a clear sense of her identity in relation to her position in the family, her tribe, her country, or as a woman living in the United States. When Afafa talks about herself in terms of her position in her family, she jokingly claims to be the “the sixth born, the fifth born, the second born, the first born and also the last born” because of her parents’ previous marriages and the children they had on either side. She embraces the complexity of her identity. Effie also identifies her position in the family as the third daughter of her parents and the youngest in the family. She, too, is Ghanaian. Yata, from Liberia, stated that she is the eldest of four children. Iya is from Sierra Leone. She identifies herself as a Krio and the third child and only girl in the family. Olu-Ola, the Nigerian woman in my study, also identifies herself in relation to her position in her family, as the third of three daughters. She went further than the other women to describe her feelings about her identity. She came to America when she was seven years old and she said that she realized that she was different.

I was different. That was the first time in my life I knew I was different from people. I looked different, I talked different, I behaved differently. I was criticized by my peers. Eventually, as I grew, I grew older in the school; I started to have more friends. I started to understand me. I don’t know if they understood me because initially, I was different.

She goes on to talk about “becoming in touch with my American side, as well as my Nigerian side.” At this age of seven, she was faced with living in two completely different cultures. As she grew up and got to know more about her Yoruba roots, she wanted to be identified as an African woman.

## Response to Interview Questions

### Education

It is important to note that even though the women spoke about education in their uninterrupted narratives in varying lengths, they all spoke about their own education or education connected with their immediate families. When I asked them specifically about their views on education, I identified the following themes.

**The importance of education.** All the women stressed the importance of education. When I asked Effie to speak on education, her passionate response comes in a question and answer format “Education? Absolutely key, very important.” Iya says, “I just feel that education is just completely important.” This sentiment was also echoed by Yata who says, “Education is the key to success.” Olu-Ola feels this way too and goes on to say, “Other than God, it’s your education.” She believes that even if one is successful in life, “education gives you that level, *it sets you apart.*” She says, “I didn’t come here for a better life, I came here for an education; so education is very, very important to me.” What I believe Olu-Ola is saying here is that unlike popular belief in the United States that foreigners come to the United States for economic reasons, to have a better standard of living than in their home countries, she came to get an education; the education that would give her a better life in her home country not in the United States She indicated elsewhere in the interview that she plans to return to her home country after completing her studies. Afafa also expressed similar feelings. She says, “I wish education, the kind of education available here, was available in my home country. Because if it were, there will be no reason to not stay there.” These women are privileged. Afafa could come to the

United States because her parents could afford to send her or she was able to get a scholarship to come.

**Influence of family on education.** The importance of education is stressed by the families of these women, especially their parents. Yata quotes her dad. “My dad always says this: ‘Your education will take you everywhere. It could take you to *the highest mountain* in the world; it could take you to meet *great people*.’” Education opens the door to what a person would not imagine is possible. She goes on to say that she was lucky that she had both of her parents to provide for her, allow her to go to school, and stress the importance of education to her. She sadly says “It’s hard to see people [not] go to school because they don’t have money.” Many children who wished to go to school did not because their parents could not afford it.

Iya, from Sierra Leone, also spoke several times during the interview about her parents’ influence on her achievement. They always stressed the importance of education. Iya notes, “I just feel that education is just completely important and it’s kind of changed everything about my life and my parents have really like instilled that in me from a very young age.” Her mother, always says to her, “Keep your focus.” Olu-Ola’s parents took her and her sisters from Nigeria so that they could get an education in America that would *enhance their future* in their home country.

For both Effie and Afafa, their older siblings also played a role in instilling in them the importance of education. As their parents are living in Ghana, their sisters who preceded them to the United States were the ones who took the responsibility of making sure that they stay on task. All of these women had family members with at least one

degree. One or both of their parents had degrees. This is atypical for African families. Usually, those at universities are the first in their families to get an education at that level. However, these women are young and have parents who are the educated elite in their countries and who have put them on this educational path for success. Yata was very proud that her mother who has been married for 24 years to her dad, a degree holder, was now in college.

It is clear that all of these women had a support group, members of their family, who encouraged them and gave them no other option but to get a good education. In Iya's words, "I was going to go to school, I was going to go to college, and I was going to get a scholarship because that's the only way I was going to go to college. There were no options." She knew right at the outset that she had to work extremely hard to fulfill her parents' expectations of her.

**Views on education in the United States.** Olu-Ola compares education in her country, Nigeria, with education in the United States. She wonders why international students do better than American-born students.

Being here I definitely notice the difference in education levels and education standards between here and back in Nigeria. I am not saying they [Americans] don't value education. They definitely do. But why is it that a lot of international students are coming here and doing and far exceeding the students that are here? They are the ones who are going after the medical field, just attaining, you know, not that the degrees are different. Just furthering their education, supersede a lot of students that are here.

Here, she struggled to articulate her thoughts and feelings, which came from seeing many American-born students not striving as hard as international students to take every

available opportunity to achieve high standards. However, she fails to realize that the small percentage of international students in the American schools, colleges and universities *are already the privileged and or high achieving students* who come to the United States. Arthur (2009) explains, “The majority of those who leave for the West have already completed secondary or postsecondary education. A growing number have credentials in technical- and science-related disciplines for which there is a high demand for workers in the United States” (p. 197). The international students who come to the United States are already the “cream of the crop” in their countries. With their background that is grounded in education and their motivation to do well regardless of obstacles, most of them outperform the American-born students.

Olu-Ola also commented on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which President George W. Bush signed into law on January 8, 2002, and which was instituted to improve education in elementary, middle, and high school. She felt that in spite of this policy a lot of students are being left behind. Also, students do not give education the importance it deserves.

Another thing that I have noticed in the schools they [people] talk about “No Child Left Behind” but I definitely see a lot of [black] children being left behind. And the very unfortunate thing is that once they are being left behind it is difficult for them to pick up again. A lot of them, they are going through elementary school, they are going through middle school but they are being left behind since kindergarten and it is becoming very difficult, impossible really for them to get back up and that’s why a lot of you know, the graduation rates, and the enrollment rates for a lot of the students are slowly declining. And so, I don’t know, education now is kind of important, but we are entering into a different century where education is slowly not becoming as a value as opposed to how you look, how you dress, how you, you know, just other things are becoming distractions pretty much. [Black] students aren’t seeing that in order to get to a different level I need to focus on my education. I need to do well. I need to do it now. Instead

they want to get ten steps ahead without beginning from step one. That's how I see that.

Iya, my participant from Sierra Leone, indicated that “an educational reform is necessary in this country” because she felt that *minority students, especially African Americans*, were not exposed to the same educational opportunities as white students, hence her passion to become an advocate for informing minority students of opportunities to further their education.

**Educated people's responsibility to help others get an education.** It was very clear from the interviews that these women are passionate about education. Apart from feeling “lucky,” and “blessed” or “privileged” to get an education here in the United States, they also felt that it is an imperative for the educated ones from their countries to help the less privileged get an education. Four out of the five women spoke about going back to their countries and helping others.

Olu-Ola shared with me that her parents would like her to complete her education and return to Nigeria to help build her nation. She mentioned that she would like to help others in Nigeria get an education. Iya, from Sierra Leone, says that she regularly meets with the leader of her leadership program and that she is now “focusing on educational policies *for minority groups in inner cities*.” This is important to her because she feels that many minority students, including her brothers, do not have the same opportunities that she had or get all the internships that were available. Apart from focusing on educational policies for these minority groups in inner cities, Iya also spoke about the need to work for and help with education in Sierra Leone.

Yata's passion for helping others get an education in Liberia came out in this quotation, "So I am trying to help other people to make a difference in their life. I don't just want to sit back and relax. No. I am trying to let other people gain education. So education is number one on my list." Afafa feels that education leads to a better life and she sees the responsibility of the educated to help others achieve this better life. "I just see it [education] as a path to a better life and a path to, once you've reached that better life, helping others get on that path as well." Being aware of the lack of great educational opportunities for minorities in the United States and education for all in their countries, these women strongly believe that it is their responsibilities as educated women to work for education.

**Problems arising from the lack of education.** It is common knowledge that education is important on every continent in the world. However, just the basic education for all in Africa is lacking. Both Effie and Yata spoke at length on the problems that Ghana and Liberia face because their citizens are not educated. Effie voices her opinion, "You know, I think, a huge, a lot of the problems in terms of war and stuff like that that go on in many places in Africa, I think some of it comes down to education or lack thereof of education and ignorance and all of that stuff." She gave several examples of problems relating to this lack of education, for example, how in the northern part of a country in Africa [Moslem] parents prevented their children from being vaccinated against polio because the religious leaders who were very influential in that part of the country told the citizens that Westerners were trying to kill their children. Ignorance on the part of these leaders is responsible for such a situation.

Yata sees the problems arising from the lack of education from the individual's standpoint and relates this to the society. She observes, "Look at our society today; if you are not educated, you are not going to go anywhere. You're not going to have no job; you're not going to have nothing!" She empathized with families who would like to educate their children but don't have the means to do so. The war in her country, Liberia, which lasted over a decade, set their education even further back.

**Educating a woman versus educating a man.** Without exception, all my study participants felt that education for all, especially for women in Africa was important. They spoke about women who were educated and whom they tried to emulate. For example, Iya spoke about her mother and her aunt who were both well educated. Yata was also proud that her mother went to college after two decades of marriage and raising children. She also spoke about an aunt who inspired her when she was a young girl because this aunt had attended college and was earning a good salary. Afafa, Effie, and Olu-Ola had mothers who were educated and sisters who had degrees.

In talking about transmitting cultural values, Iya came close to advocating for the education of girls and women. She says, "If the woman in the household knows, the whole household knows." However, it was Effie who spoke passionately for the need to turn around the practice in Africa of giving preference to educating boys as opposed to girls. She felt that the only way that more children would be educated in Africa was making it a priority to educate girls. Effie says, "There is this proverb or saying and I think you have different versions of it in many different parts of Africa, where they say 'you educate a man and you educate an individual; you educate a woman and you

educate an entire village' or something along those lines." She commented on the fact that although this proverb exists, yet when resources are inadequate, parents choose to send their sons to school instead of their daughters. This, she acknowledges, stems from the African culture of relegating the woman to the home, and she explains, "You know, if you don't have all the resources and you have to pick which one to educate then you'll educate the man because after all the woman is just going to stay home, have babies, and take care of the family." She went on to give her rationale for reversing this culture of educating boys first.

Education of women is so key because you know even now with the changing world and stuff like that; I think women are still so much more influential in raising their kids than the men are. So a well-educated woman is going to influence her kids appropriately. You know she is going to show kind of like her son this is how you treat a woman, you respect a woman. I am your mother. Would you want someone to do this [whatever is inappropriate] to me?

Most importantly, she acknowledges that in Africa educating a woman was not just giving her an education for herself and her family but for all the lives that she would eventually touch. She opines, "It's so key to just educate a woman. It's not just for herself, it's also influencing her kids that she is raising and all the other kind of kids in the community who see this relationship and are influenced by it."

There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of feelings of these women in my study who are passionate about changing or creating educational policies to help their countries or favor women. Effie, for example says that currently one sees women in higher roles in Ghana. She says, "I think right now in Ghana, the Ministry for Women and Children's Affairs [sees to it] that more of women's issues are coming to the

forefront and being dealt with.” It is my hope, though, that they are passionate enough to work together with people *outside their comfort zones* to make this happen. Some of the time, when these women speak, they seem to echo the thoughts of their parents (“that’s what my dad told me,” “my mom always says”) or society, without giving a lot of thought to issues. If they were to follow the current issues on education or women here in the United States or in their countries, they would understand the intricate nature of power and politics and realize that creating or changing educational policies is *not as simple as they believe*. However, I do commend them for wanting to change policies and help others get an education.

### **Women**

As I indicated earlier, in phrasing my questions to these women, I tried to be as general as I could because I did not want to steer them in any particular direction or a particular area to address. I wanted them to give me their thoughts on the subject. When I asked them about their views on women, they all wanted to know *which category of women I wanted them to speak on*. I then said that they could tell me about women in the society from which they come and those in the society in which they now live. With this explanation they started off by talking about women from or in their individual countries.

As my research participants speak about their views on women in society in Anglophone West Africa and in the United States, they seem to have a very narrow perspective. Olu-Ola makes it clear that when she speaks of Nigerian women, she is actually referring to the Nigerian women *she interacts with in the United States and who attend her church*. Having left Nigeria at the age of seven, she said that she would not be

in a position to speak about the women currently in that society. Afafa who came to the United States to attend university also identifies the group of women she would be referring to when she speaks about Ghanaian women. She says, “I don’t know exactly what age range to discuss, but I think I am going to be talking about the women *I have grown up watching*.” So these would be the women she observed in Ghana. Effie also came to the United States as an adult. She chose to speak about different groups of Ghanaian women, from the traditional women in society, to those of her mother’s generation—*some of the affluent ones in the country*—and also those of her age group. Yata left Liberia as an adult and the Liberian women she speaks of are those she observed in her country. She says, “The women from where I grew up . . .” For Iya, who left Sierra Leone at the age of three, her frame of reference when she talks about Sierra Leonean women is mainly *her mother and the few women who are her relatives*.

**Characteristics of Anglophone West African women.** Olu-Ola says that Nigerian women are caring and that they put family first. She says, “The women from where I am from are very caring and family comes first.” This point of women being caring and putting family first is stressed by all the women I interviewed. Yata says that Liberian women “take care of their kids.” She explains that even though women’s roles are changing they still focus on their children and family. Iya also speaks of Sierra Leonean women—her mother, her grandmother and her aunts—in the United States, in London, or in Sierra Leone, taking care of their children.

Olu-Ola notes that Nigerian women are “sassy,” “aggressive,” and “talkative.” Afafa also uses the word “sassiness,” which I understood to mean lively and high

spirited, to refer to Ghanaian women. Being from this part of the world, I knew exactly what these women mean. Usually, when women from Anglophone West Africa speak, they do so with raised voices, hand and facial gestures. To an observer who is not familiar with this culture, these women would be thought of as “shouting” or “being in a fight.” However, they simply express their viewpoints with passion. My children have told me on several occasions that I was shouting when I was only speaking!

The participants in my study use the words “industrious,” “selfless,” “and religious” to describe women from their countries and gave examples to explain. Afafa says

Ghanaian women work several jobs. They will even, if they are not necessarily very educated, they will sell, they will make things and they will basically do everything that they can to put their children through school. I feel like that’s a very, very common trait among every woman. They are mostly very selfless. They will wake up pretty early and they go to bed very late just to make sure that everything is in order.

Yata echoes these characteristics about Liberian women. She said that they work hard and that their selflessness is most evident in the fact that in spite of hardships, they would struggle to keep their families.

Without exception, each of my narrators expressed that they come from Christian religious backgrounds and talked about their religion to varying degrees. This is also a sign of western orientation and privilege. Effie mentions that Ghanaians in general “tend to be religious people.” Afafa also says that Ghanaian women are mostly religious and that they “fellowship” with each other. She explains, “Most of them are very religious. They fellowship in groups a lot! They, I mean when I say ‘fellowship,’ not only in the

religious sense but even when they go out on errands like to the salon or the market, they will strike a conversation with a stranger.”

**Anglophone West African women as mothers and wives.** When the participants in my study speak of women in their countries, they discuss these women in relation to their children and or their husbands. The theme of “women as mothers” is mentioned or implied by these women who come from different countries. Afafa states, “They mother their own as well as other people’s children.” In fact, she links women to children right at the outset when I asked her to give me her thoughts on women. She started off by saying, “Ghanaian women and their children . . .” Effie’s point about educating a woman first is because of the far reaching gains of a woman who is educated and the fact that she “mothers” other children. Effie says an educated woman is “also influencing her kids that she is raising and all the other kind of kids in the community.” This is supported by Afafa who says that women do not hesitate to correct other people’s children.

The theme of “women as wives” is a recurring one when Yata and my other study participants speak about women in their individual countries. In the first place, their mothers are all married to their fathers and have kept their marriages ranging from 18 years to over 30 years. Yata proudly states that her mother and father have been married for 24 years. She rehashed one of her mother’s sayings, “Men look up to their women because ‘every successful man has a strong wife behind him’ so that’s what my mom always says.” This saying comes in slightly different versions in different societies in West Africa. A version roughly translated goes like this, “Although the man is the head,

the woman is the neck without which the head cannot turn.” The irony in these societies is that the industry, selflessness and other positive attributes of women are acknowledged in these sayings, but at the same time women are expected to be “obedient and submissive” to their husbands.

One of the expectations for a Ghanaian girl when she becomes a woman is for her to get a husband. Effie recounts the taunting of teachers when girls don’t take their cooking classes seriously. “The teachers would kind of mock the girls who were not necessarily interested in that aspect of things; ‘if you don’t do that, you will never find a husband when you grow up.’” Her own aunts would fuss at her because of her slender figure. She says, “I have aunts who kind of bother me. ‘You are still so skinny, you need to get some meat on your body, you know. How are you going to find a man, if you are so skinny?’” She goes on to say that it was the perception of women in their society that “you have to cook for your man. That’s the best way to a man’s heart!” I should add here that the women in my study are not married. They discussed marriage in general, the marriage of their parents, society’s views on marriage, but apart from Effie, one of the Ghanaian women who hinted at the change in her perspectives of being open to marrying someone other than Ghanaian, they never said whether they would like to get married.

**The participants’ mothers.** As I write this section on women in Anglophone West Africa, I must acknowledge the mothers of the participants in my study. All of the women I interviewed spoke of their mothers with appreciation and highlighted their qualities and the strong relationship between them and their mothers.

First of all, they all mention that their mothers are religious, and that they grew up in religious households. Iya's mother made sure that they went to church. The children even had church cards that had to be signed by their pastor every Sunday! Iya and her brothers went to a private, religious elementary school. She says, "We are a very religious household, and it's just how it's done." Olu-Ola's mother is a Nigerian pastor. She says that her mother (and father) "started instilling in us [her and her sisters] the right values of a Christian home and, you know, the values of prayer, the values of seeking the Lord, things like that: a strong center, a strong Christian household." Effie speaks of being raised Catholic in Ghana. After her exposure to other cultures and ways of being, she started to question the beliefs of her faith, but her mother would not entertain these discussions and when they had different opinions on issues, "she'll just say, 'well now you have an opinion for everything' and that's how the argument ends." Children were brought up to respect and not to argue with their parents because the parent, "the adult," is always right. Effie said that she knew this but felt that she must be heard and would not hesitate to make her voice heard. She felt that arguing with an adult does not mean disrespecting that adult.

All of these mothers are highly educated. Apart from Yata's Liberian mother who is in college and Afafa who did not mention whether her mother had a degree, the mothers of the other three women have degrees. They all had good jobs. Most of all, they all took the education of their daughters very seriously. They are considered "homemakers." In fact, the lenses through which Iya observed Sierra Leonean women are primarily through her mother's. She says, "My mom, like every Sunday when I'm home,

she really tries to instill moral values in me especially when I was going away to boarding school as a female, as the only girl.” She speaks at length about her mother’s passion to get her children and other young people understand and uphold their culture. Iya says that her mother is part of a group of heritage women whose goal is to preserve their heritage by bringing the younger generation together at functions.

Apart from Iya and Yata who come from war-torn countries, the other participants in my study spoke of having gone back to their countries for short periods of time during their sojourn here in the United States. Their mothers encouraged them to learn about their cultures and used different opportunities to do so. These mothers are role models for their daughters.

**Society’s expectations of Anglophone West African women.** When the women in my study spoke about women in their societies, they sometimes gave me the impression that they were standing back and looking in. As I mentioned earlier, they indicated which category of women they were going to talk about. Apart from Effie who tends to think about, analyze, and comment on the issues she speaks about, the other women spoke about the category of women they identified as the representatives of all women in their societies. For example, when Afafa starts her response to the question on women, she generalized by saying, “Ghanaian women and their children.” This is on the assumption that all Ghanaian women have or should have children. When Olu-Ola, Yata, and Effie said that “women are to be obedient and submissive,” they did not comment on whether they were referring to traditional women or women who have received a high

level of education and independence, and most importantly, whether they agree with this statement.

**“Women are to be obedient and submissive.”** Three of the five women I interviewed—Olu-Ola from Nigeria, Yata from Liberia, and Effie from Ghana—pointed out that the women in their countries were expected to be “obedient and submissive.” It is either expressly stated or implied that women are to be obedient and submissive to their husbands. Olu-Ola says, “I feel that women there, back in Nigeria, are taught to be submissive to their husbands.” Speaking about Liberian women, Yata says, “The women from where I grew up, they are to be obedient and submissive.” And Effie from Ghana expresses the point in this way, “It was very much the traditional; the man is the head of the household. He controls the money, how it got spent and all of that stuff. He would give the woman money and all of that.” This expectation from society and financial dependence on their husbands prevented women from breaking their marriages even if they were abused. Effie speaks to this.

You know, because leaving your husband was a taboo and I think part of that was related to the fact that these women were financially dependent on their husbands and once you leave—it’s not like here in the U. S. where there are laws that would be more protective of the woman in terms of child support and alimony and stuff—so once you leave your marital home you are on your own.

The discussion of this expectation of women being submissive and obedient to their husbands led to the topic of divorce in their countries. Yata seems to believe that no matter what a woman may go through in Liberia, she does not break up her home. She says, “I don’t care how hard the marriage is, they are going to stay there and work it out

to take care of that family.” And later on she expounds on this, “If some women try to leave, they would leave, but I think women over there in my country try to be submissive and kind of try to follow what’s right in the eyes of the public and themselves.”

Effie, on the other hand, acknowledges that Ghanaian women do break up their marriages and she attributes the high rate of divorce in Ghana to the fact that nowadays *most women do not depend on their husbands for their financial support*, and more importantly the stigma or taboo attached to a failed marriage is no longer strongly held in society. She explains, “More women are working and stuff like that. They are a little more assertive and so they are more willing to stand up for themselves, when they are in bad situations.”

Traditionally, when there were disputes in the family, such disputes in West African societies were handled through mediation within the matrilineal or patrilineal societies. However, as these societies changed and women and children faced severe economic hardships, many governments stepped in to alleviate the suffering of women. For example, in Ghana, the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) in the 1980s “moved forward with populist approaches to the country’s socioeconomic problems, opting to institute new legal norms and to encourage women to use family courts as mechanisms to obtain relief” (Mikell, 1997). One of the Akan women in Accra, Ghana, interviewed in 1986, explains, “Before 1983, we were hesitant to bring the men to court and ask for maintenance . . . our mothers would never support this. But things got bad in 1983, then I knew I had to do it” (Mikell, 1997, p. 96). So, women in bad situations do

have some recourse through the legal system even though taking their husbands to court would have been traditionally frowned upon.

Olu-Ola compares divorce rates in Nigeria with those in the United States. She says, “Another thing that I also ponder on a lot is the differences in the divorce rate. Divorce rates here are much higher, whereas divorce rates there are much less.” She speculates that the reason for this is because women in Nigeria “are taught to be submissive to their husbands.” She also attributes this low rate of divorce in her country to the fact that men have polygamous homes in Nigeria whereas this is not the case in the United States. Her tying polygamy with one of the reasons for the low rate of divorce in her country needs examining. How does a woman get out of a polygamous marriage? Assuming that the divorce rates in Nigeria are lower, is the expectation that women are to be obedient and submissive in their marriages regardless of whether they are in monogamous or polygamous marriages not the real reason for the low rate of divorce?

**Women are to be the gatekeepers of their culture.** The Anglophone West African women were also expected to uphold the culture and pass it on to their children, especially their daughters. The most important role of these women is teaching their daughters how to cook. It did not matter whether they were stay-at-home mothers or mothers working outside the home, traditional women or affluent women, they made sure that their daughters learnt how to cook.

Iya spoke at great length about her mother being the custodian of their Sierra Leonean Krio culture and making sure that her only daughter knew how to cook when she got to a certain age. She says, “My mom always instilled that it was your [the

daughter's] job to know how to cook. So every time I come back home for the summer my mom would have me in the kitchen to make our traditional foods." This is why Iya could not understand how some of her friends' mothers did not cook. She says, "Just that my friends' moms don't cook was a shocker to me because that I did not understand."

Effie echoes this expectation of girls learning how to cook. "The idea in Ghana is that a girl, when she reaches a certain age, she is taken into the kitchen and she is taught how to cook." It was not clear from Effie's narrative whether she was taught how to cook at home. However, she learnt how to cook in school. She spoke about a course that students took in middle school.

We had this course known as life skills where we were taught, I guess the idea was to teach some of those basic skills like cooking and stuff like that. So, every week, we would make a different dish in school. We were broken up into groups with a mixture of guys and girls, and even the teachers expected the girls to do the majority of the cooking aspect with the guys just hanging around or just helping while the girls took over with the cooking.

She noted that the attitude of the teachers reflects that of society. Even though both boys and girls were in the class, it was not necessary for the boys to learn how to cook. She says, "After all, they were expected to marry when they become adults and it would be their wives' responsibility to cook for them." However, the Anglophone West African women in the United States have redefined their roles. *Women who work outside the home become more assertive than they would have been in their countries.* Their men are now required to share responsibilities in the home. Arthur (2009) explains

Migration has altered the gender roles of these men as they have become more egalitarian in their relationships with their partners. Back home in West Africa,

these men may never be that involved in the lives of their children or in assisting with household chores as these roles are gendered, with the women performing the bulk of the chores. Child care and household work is feminized. (p. 101)

Back in West Africa, even if these women worked outside the home, there are always other women in the society that would work for the family to complete these chores rather than turning them over to the men.

Anglophone West African women also had to teach their children to respect their elders. All adults carry authority, regardless of their occupation or gender, and they are to be respected. Respecting others, their culture and their religion was a big part of my growing up. The women in my study also stressed the importance of respect in their countries. They could not understand how students in the United States could disobey their teachers or talk back to their parents.

I found out from my research, my study participants, and my personal experiences that women from Anglophone West Africa are expected to be obedient to first of all their parents and later on to their husbands. They are expected to get married, have children, care for their families, and supplement the family's income when necessary, because they were in charge of the day-to-day running of the home. They have a great responsibility of maintaining their culture. Major decisions were made by their men. These were *expectations*. It did not mean that the women fulfilled these expectations all the time. I discussed earlier how women demonstrated their power individually or collectively in times of hardships or wars.

**Anglophone West African women and American-born women.** When the participants in my study referred to American-born women as they compared them to Anglophone West African women, they usually meant African American women. Yata highlights the fact that there are more single women parents here in the United States than in Liberia. She says, “If there is just a little problem [in a marriage] the lady is just going to say, ‘I don’t have to stay and take this. I’m going to do my own’ and then become a single mother and the kids have problems and then everything turns back to the parent, so the society changes for the kids.” Here, Yata makes two assumptions. First of all, she assumes that single women who are parents were married and got divorced. She also assumes that the kids of single parents have problems because their moms are single. Yata seems to be rehashing the stereotype she has come to accept as fact.

Olu-Ola also compared African women to African American women. She felt that these African American women in the United States are “self-oriented.” They “grew up with the mentality, ‘you look after yourself.’” She goes on to say women put down other women because they want to “have a higher power.” Here, she struggled to explain her thinking and finally compared what she was trying to articulate to reality shows on TV. She says, “Like some of those shows, some of those roles, reality shows, there is that sense of wanting to put that intimidation factor into another woman. You know, that sense of power, which I have not only noticed in the women but in the society as well.”

**Lesbians.** Two of the women in my study spoke about lesbians. Yata says, “I don’t know if you talk about this, but it’s really hard where I’m from to see or talk about lesbian. First of all, they don’t believe in it. They feel like it doesn’t exist, so they never

think about it or talk about it.” She did not expound on this. Effie, on the other hand, spoke a lot about lesbians and struggled to reconcile her religious beliefs as a Catholic, society’s views about lesbians, her mother’s attitude, which was in tune with her Ghanaian society and the wonderful caring lesbians she had come to know in the United States. She said that when she came to the United States and started attending a women’s college it was a culture shock for her that women openly identified as lesbians because “It is one of those things that is a taboo in Ghana and nobody ever talks about and no one would ever dare come out, and you know, say, ‘hey, I’m a lesbian,’ because Ghanaians tend to be religious people. If a woman dared come out, she would be regarded a sinner.” Effie went on to question society’s stance on this issue. She acknowledges her religious beliefs and says that it is not for us to judge other people. She says, “We are all sinners anyway. It’s not up to us to judge anyone so, you know, who am I to judge anyone?”

Effie’s perspective changed when she went to college and university. She says, “I go to college and then I meet all these people who are genuinely nice people, honest, caring.” These are people who would invite her and other international students to their homes during the Thanksgiving break and other holidays. They genuinely cared for them. She goes on to say that in spite of the fact that she was raised Catholic she would not be blind to seeing people as human beings. She says, “After you see all these things, it’s hard to sit back and say, just because someone is a lesbian, I’m not going to talk to them or I’m going to think they are so wrong.” Her mother, on the other hand, would not even entertain any discussion of this when Effie brings up the subject and tries to get her mother to think differently. She says her mother would simply dismiss it and say, “They

need to stop that.” Here we have another example of Effie’s mother not allowing any discussion on beliefs and traditions. Effie’s mother is typical of the traditional Anglophone West African women whose religion does not accept lesbians.

### **Friends**

Afafa, Effie and Iya all said that they had friends and they told me who these friends are. Afafa said that she has about two or three best friends. These are friends she made while she attended boarding school in Ghana. They are Ghanaians. Fortunately for her, the friends are here in the United States. Effie also said that she had a lot of friends. They are African and Caribbean friends that she made during her undergraduate days. She said that she made other friends when she took a break from her studies and was thrust into the workplace and had to interact with a variety of people from different parts of the world. She then wished that she had taken advantage of getting to know more people during her undergraduate days instead of just sticking with the African and Caribbean group. She acknowledged that she was “just introverted by nature.” She says, “I don’t tend to go out of my way to get to know people. So, when I’m put in a place where there is more familiar people, people more like me, I tend to stick with that.” Iya is the most outgoing who says that she has different sets of friends, friends she made from every level of her education—from her middle school, her boarding high school, her program that prepared minority students for success in education, and her current university. When going out with these friends, she simply tells her mother, for example, that she was going out with her high school friends, her university friends or friends from her middle school program.

Yata, unlike these other three women told me several times that she had friends, “a lot of friends” but did not say anything about where she made these friends or who they were. After asserting seven times that she had friends, she said that she really did not have friends. Olu-Ola does not seem to have people she would consider as her friends. She says, “*All the friends that I had have not influenced me; I have dropped them and the friends that I do have now, those [are] people that are just lingering.*”

Who do these women consider as friends?

**Definitions of friends and friendships.** The women gave me their definition of friends and friendship and explained the qualities that they look for in a friend. Afafa says that her friends are the people with whom she has “shared experiences.” Her closest friends are the women she first met in boarding school. The friends she made in the United States, she says, “are somewhat all second generation African people.”

She goes on to say

You know, they didn’t have to tell me that they were second generation Africans. I could kind of tell. And just that kind of shared experience, even though we grew up in different parts of the world, and our parents aren’t even from the same countries, that shared experience makes our friendship gel and flow better than like my experiences with somebody who might be different.

Apart from her African friends, she mentioned that the other friends she has are from Argentina, Colombia and Israel. She then paused to ponder whether it was the shared experiences that made her friends with these people or something else. She says, “I don’t know, maybe it is the foreign factor, or maybe it’s the African factor. I don’t know what

it is, but I feel like most of my friends have some sort of, something other than American.”

Both Iya and Olu-Ola have similar definitions of the people they regard as friends. Iya says, “They are just a support system for you. Friends are people that you can always turn to if you have a problem. Friends are people that encourage you to complete your goals.” And Olu-Ola echoes this feeling. “I feel like friendship, when you say, you are friends with someone is someone that’s there with you through the good and the bad.”

**Nurturing friendships.** The women who had close friends, best friends, and friends they have had since their school days, nurture their friendships. Afafa spends time, albeit mostly virtual, with friends she made from back home in Ghana. She says, “So we talk a lot on the phone, Skype, E-mail, and Facebook. I don’t think I’m as close to anyone here as I am to them.” It would seem that it takes time for Afafa to make friends, but when she does, she wants to keep the friends that she has made. Effie, too, makes the point.

There was one girl from NY who was across the hall from me first year and we are still good friends till now. I went home with her a couple of Thanksgivings when I was an undergrad. A few years back, I was at her wedding. I still keep in touch with her and we visit each other. So that’s definitely one bond, you know, that I formed that was not *in my usual comfortable circle*, but I think I actually started opening up more to different people once I left college and I was working.

The women felt that many African American women do not nurture friendships. This may be because of the seriousness with which Africans view friendship. Nwosu (2009) explains, “In the African contexts, friendship is seen as a duty, a joyful union between individuals that accords certain rights and responsibilities. This explains the seriousness

with which Africans approach friendships” (p. 170). It is this “seriousness with which Africans approach friendships” (p. 170) that makes these Anglophone West African women nurture their friendships. Unlike them, African Americans do not see friendship as a “duty.”

Asselin and Mastron (2001) give an insight into how Americans view friendships. “Because the bonds that link friends do not necessarily go very deep, American friendship is not necessarily considered a major commitment” (p. 84). Many foreigners in the United States share this sentiment. I once attended a conference where one of the presenters used the metaphors of the peach to represent friendships in the United States and the coconut to represent friendships in many African countries. With the peach, it is very easy to “get into” the friendship. When one feels comfortable and thinks this is an established friendship and begins to relax, one hits the stone of the peach and wonders what happened. In the case of the coconut, it is hard to break the shell. One has to work hard at a relationship, which may take years before a level of trust is arrived at and one can only enter into this soft pulpy flesh and juice of the coconut and can then relax in the friendship that has been built. Asselin and Mastron (2001) state

Americans are open, friendly, easy to approach. They are easily on first-name terms, and invite virtual strangers into their homes with a generous ease that amazes the French. But if the first walls are easy to step or jump over, the barriers rise as you get closer to the core. The core itself may never be reached, even by a spouse, children, and intimate friends. (p. 84)

Afafa thinks that Americans are always looking to make new friends and more friends. She expresses it in this way.

I do notice that a lot of my American peers here are quick to forget the people they went to high school with. They can't wait till they get to college so that they can make new friends then just forget the people that they used to know. So it's almost as if they express some amount of surprise at the amount of time I spend talking to people I went to boarding school with especially those who happen to be here [in the United States] studying.

These Anglophone West African women in my study, who are all university students, do not seem to have close friends from the United States. My observation is supported by Gareis (2012) who surveyed international students at colleges and universities in the United States and found out that many international students do not have close American friends. She said, "Nearly 40 percent of the survey respondents had no close American friends and would have liked more meaningful interaction with people born here." She goes on to say, "More than half of the students who were less than very satisfied with their American friendships felt that the problem lay with the Americans." The students in Gareis' survey highlighted superficiality on the part of the Americans and their not being interested in other cultures as key factors. Whether or not this is a valid point, another aspect of the problem is that international students tend to "self-segregate" and seek out others like themselves.

### **Race**

On the subject of race, the women went in different directions as they tried to articulate their thoughts on race. First of all, they approached race in one of two ways. They either associated race with skin color and or with racism. Afafa, having tied her identity with her race as she identified herself as not only Ghanaian but Akan and Ashanti as well, says, "Even though being African is not a race, I still want to touch on that.

Basically race is not a construct that exists that much in Ghana. If anything, we talk about tribalism.” Here, Afafa equates racism with tribalism and so links race to racism. And Yata says, “Race, we don’t really care about that in my country because everybody is the same complexion” This is a sweeping statement because not everybody in Liberia is of the same complexion. There are white people and black people in Liberia. Even within the group of black people, there are light-skinned Liberians who are descendants of the early liberated Americans that settled in Liberia and held power for a very long time. These light-skinned Afro-Americans who came to settle in Liberia looked down on the dark-skinned people they met in the country.

Iya, who left Sierra Leone at the age of three and grew up in the United States spoke about black people and white people. She uses her schools to explain this.

I went to a school, elementary school, with all my classmates, my school 100% black. That’s how it was. I went to a high school, my boarding school, and it was 85% white and it was a change to me because I came from a situation where all my friends were black and I never knew any white people. It was like race was not evident. It was the norm. We only had black people.

She went on to say that the change of having eighty-five percent of her high school population being white meant that she was the students’ first black friend and they were her first white friends. She came from this situation in high school to her university where students “did not have earlier exposure to different races” and tend to “self-segregate” with the blessing of the university.

**Race and racism.** Effie and Olu-Ola tied race to racism at the outset. Effie starts off by saying, “So, I know America has a big issue with race and racism.” And Olu-Ola

says, “Race, in respect to one another? If someone says it, the first thing I think about is racism.” They defined racism from the viewpoint of “otherness,” or highlighting “otherness,” “discrimination,” “bullying,” or “feeling a sense of superiority or inferiority.”

Having articulated their thoughts on race and racism, two of the women specifically told me that they had never experienced racism. Effie says, “I’ll say me personally; I don’t think I’ve experienced racism in all my years of living in the U. S.” and Olu-Ola says, “I never experienced racism when it comes to a white person to a black person. Personally, for me I have never witnessed it. Maybe, it occurred to me and I never noticed it.” However, without exception, all the women said that they had experienced discrimination from African Americans. Is this as a result of the narrow experience of the majority of African Americans who have only lived within their cultural confines? Is it because of the negative portrayal of Africans in the media? Is it that African Americans feel a sense of superiority as “Blacks in America”?

**African Americans discriminating against Africans.** Both Afafa and Effie contend that African Americans discriminating against Africans stem from the notion of blackness, being Black in the United States. Effie comments

Sometimes I felt like kind of judgment and I am looked down on more by African Americans than I was by Whites which is kind of interesting because then that’s not a racist thing, you know, it’s just like, oh well you are the African, we are all Black and we’re kind of much like we are above you in Africa where conditions are so harsh, you know you are not as well educated and stuff.

Yata, from Liberia, also experienced this stereotyping of Africans. “I’m not going to say I had difficulties with white people, basically black people, because a lot of black people don’t like you; they are trying to change you. I don’t know why, but, racism, it was very hard for me when I first got here.” She went on to say that she suffered a lot from the taunts she got from her classmates when she first came to the United States. She says, “So the kids up here had the notion that people in Africa don’t wear clothes, they don’t wear slippers, they wear nothing, they walk with their bare feet. They roam around with animals and all those notions that already existed in their beliefs.” These taunts from kids took a different form in college where she says that people were trying to stress her out just because she came from Africa.

Effie observes similar misconceptions of Africans held by African Americans.

Even black people have all these misconceptions about Africa. They think *it’s just war torn*. We live on trees or we live in mud huts and we don’t speak good English. You know, Americans, unfortunately, are ignorant if you compare them to Europeans. So where ignorance in America spreads across all races—Black, White—you know that racism cuts across board in terms of both Blacks and Whites.

These notions of Africa held by Americans that Yata and Effie document are supported by other studies. For example, one of the participants in Arthur’s (2009) study, a refugee from Anglophone West Africa, compares her experiences in Denmark with those in the United States.

People identify you purely by your racial and ethnic attributes. And being Black has become like a burden for me. We are not accepted here like we were in Denmark. The Danes were very kind to us and went out of the way to make sure

we had everything we wanted. In America, people treat you with disdain and with a condescending attitude because you are Black. (p. 63)

Obiora (2003) in discussing Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* contends that

Although Walker validates her involvement in the campaign against female circumcision on grounds of her love for her African roots, her work is peppered *with contemptuous remarks about things African*. Of graver concern is the fact that her angle of vision and unmonitored biases reinforce imperialistic impulses which reify Africa as the morally bankrupt antithesis of the West. (p. 204)

As Obiora points out in the quotation above, Alice Walker's "love" for her African roots does not erase her negative biases of Africa. Well-meaning African Americans do slip into stereotyping those from Africa when caught off guard. They sometimes fall into these negative depictions of Africans when they do not audit their feelings. The irony is that the present trend is for African Americans to have DNA tests to discover from which part of Africa they originate. Several online business opportunities have sprung up to fulfill this need. The website African DNA, for example, boasts, "African DNA is the only genetics testing company specializing in tracing African American ancestry that can reveal to you your percentages of African . . . ancestral origins," a quotation the site attributes to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

### **Features of Narrative Research in the Findings**

As I worked with the text, I became aware of features of narrative research: selectivity, silence, slippage, intertextuality, and a cultural framework of meaning, which I defined in Chapter III.

*Selectivity* is what the narrator chooses to tell the interviewer. Yata, my Liberian participant, for example, only told me indirectly, that she had three siblings and did not elaborate on this. She said, “I am the oldest of four.” The other four women, like Yata, gave me their position in the family and information in some detail about their siblings. Each woman told me as much as she wanted to share. While Iya from Sierra Leone spent a long time talking about her family, Effie from Ghana spoke almost exclusively about her education. As Effie went into minute details about her education, I was saying within myself, “All right, enough, tell me what life was like growing up in Ghana!” Of course, I held back but made a note of one of my biases, “The Sentimental/nostalgic I.”

*Silence* is what the narrator omits from the narrative. I observed instances of silence in the narratives. All of the women spoke about their families, the expectations for women in their societies to be mothers and wives, but none of them gave me any indication of whether they would like to get married or have children. Also, when the women who specifically used the words “obey,” “obedient” and “submissive” as they referred to how women were expected to behave to their husbands, they never said whether they agreed with their societies’ expectations.

Because she traveled out of Ghana and was exposed to several different people and cultures, Effie says she was no longer thinking that a Ghanaian woman has to marry a Ghanaian man. None of the others questioned the expectations. An explanation of what is regarded as silence here may be because of the cultural values of societies in this part of the world where children are brought up in an authoritarian way and they grow up

accepting “the givens” without question. They also may not have felt comfortable sharing what they regarded as personal or private.

I expected these women to give some insight into what life was like for them growing up as children. Apart from Olu-Ola who spoke about playing with the neighborhood kids till late when she stayed with her aunt and uncle here in the United States, none of my narrators volunteered any information on their childhood.

The two women who came from war-torn countries only mentioned that there were wars in their countries. Iya from Sierra Leone only mentioned the war in relation to her leaving the country. She was three years old at the time. Even if she were much older and had recollections of the war, it is understandable when narrators are silent on traumatic experiences. Yata, also experienced war in her country as a child and witnessed atrocities, which she only mentioned in passing. It is not pleasant to talk about wars, so my participants’ silence on the wars in their countries is understandable.

*Slippage* has to do with the contradictions in the individual’s story. Yata’s narrative had instances of slippage. When I asked her about friends she said

I have made friends with people from other parts of the world. I make a lot of friends. I make friends, but I won’t if I am trying to get a 4.0 gpa, I am not going to, I won’t have time to sit and go out and party and stuff like that, but I do make friends with people. I am the kind of shy person. I won’t be going to walk to you and be like Can you be my friend? No, if we talk, or somebody introduce us, then okay, *we are friends* but, yeah, *I do make friends*, but *I am just like don’t go everywhere trying to make friends* like trying to . But I do have friends in school. But high school, I really didn’t have much, I just talk to anybody who was willing to talk to me, and basically, *I really don’t have friends*.

After telling me that she makes a lot of friends and that she has made friends with people from other parts of the world, Yata goes on to say that she is shy, that she is trying to get a 4.0 grade point average, so she does not have time to socialize. She says she does not go everywhere trying to make friends. After contradicting herself several times she ended up saying, “I really don’t have friends.” On the subject of race and racism, after telling me that she had no difficulties with white people, she went on to narrate an instance of being discriminated against by a white guidance counselor. She says

So it’s very hard. *I’m not going to say I had difficulties with white people, basically black people, because a lot of black people don’t like you, they are trying to change you. I don’t know why, but, racism, it was very hard for me when I first got here. As time goes by, I pretend that it does not exist. I just move on with my life because they don’t bother me no more.*

But it was something that got to me because I had teachers who told me ‘oh you won’t go nowhere because you are African, because you are black.’ Even in high school I got left behind with my friends. Even though I graduated, *I didn’t go to college because my advisor was white.* She said, oh you have to do this before you graduate and I didn’t. So I felt that she didn’t really like me. So I didn’t go to college for a year, but it’s something that I don’t really talk about because I don’t talk about it, but it still exists.

Yata attributed her not going to college when she graduated from high school to the fact that the guidance counselor was white and not because she did not do what she was told to do.

An instance of slippage in Olu-Ola’s narrative is when she affirms that she did not come to the United States for a better life but for an education. This is contradictory because an education leads to a better life. So whether that better life for her is in the United States or in her country, she *did* come to the United States for a better life. But as

I commented earlier on, she made this statement to differentiate herself from people who are considered as *economic immigrants*.

*Intertextuality* helps the researcher with text analysis. Comparisons are made between the individuals' stories and also within an individual's story. I constantly made comparisons between my narrators' stories. I found out that these women share common vocabulary items. In addition to "sassy," "obedient," and "submissive," which I have already mentioned, they used the word, "focus/focused" in speaking about their education., "instill" or "instilled in me" when discussing how their parents stressed things they valued. I was surprised to find myself using this word as I reported my findings. "For both Effie and Afafa, their older siblings also played a role in instilling in them the importance of education." I do not know whether this was as a result of having the same cultural framework of meaning or whether it was as a result of having read the women's narratives over and over and became familiar with the expression.

The three of my participants who went to boarding high schools, Yata and Effie in Ghana and Iya in the United States seem to share a common educational background. These women all mentioned their academics and the fact that they were expected to take on leadership roles at school. In addition, they and their classmates knew that the next logical step for them was going to university. The two students who attended public high schools did not speak a lot on their academics and they never said anything about leadership or how they developed at their schools. Furthermore, the women who went to boarding schools tended to have been more exposed to diverse peoples and cultures. Whether they benefitted from this exposure is a different story. Within this diversity,

“There was ‘*ethnic clustering*,’ what one would expect to find anywhere, because birds of an ethnic feather still flock together” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 19). However, this is a small study to make conclusions on private boarding versus public day high schools and their effectiveness in preparing students for higher education.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I discussed my findings from the interviews I conducted with my five study participants. In response to the prompt, “Tell me the story of your life,” all my narrators spoke about their families, their education, and their identity. When I transcribed this section, their narratives ranged from six lines to a hundred and thirty seven lines. In answer to open-ended questions on education, women, race and friends, the women spoke on aspects of these subjects such as the importance of education, educating a woman versus educating a man, the identities of women in both Anglophone West Africa and the United States, race and racism, and how they establish and nurture friendships.

I also identified features of narrative research, the methodology I used in this study. The narratives lend themselves to this methodology as I was able, through the narratives, to capture similarities in the stories of these women from different countries and tribes in Anglophone West Africa. As a woman from this region, I identify culturally with many parts of their stories. As a researcher, I was able to separate myself or step back from the research by auditing my biases so as not to influence my findings.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction and Overview**

In this last chapter, I give my conclusions on the study. I recapture the discussion of blackness in America, and how Anglophone West African women have come to understand their “skin color identity,” as the central identity through which all other aspects of their identity are structured. They reject this central identity thrust on them and emphasize the parts of their identity from their heritage, which they restructure as their situations warrant and as they recreate their identity in the United States. They hold on to their families and their faith for strength to overcome difficulties. Nsonwu (2008) writes about Liberian refugee women in the United States. She states, “I uncovered and analyze two prominent themes, God-Talk and Kin-Talk. These African perspectives highlight the importance of faith and family as a means of survival and strength for these women” (p. 128). Although Nsonwu’s study is on refugee women without a high level of education and from only one of the Anglophone West African countries, her findings support the central focus of Anglophone West African women.

For Anglophone West African women who are educated, just as the five in my study, education is the door opened to them by their God and their families to become great and do great things. This is reflected in my Nigerian participant’s comment. Olu-Ola says, “Other than God, it’s your education.” These women believe in their culture

and their community and in practicing what Robinson (2010) refers to as “cultural altruism.” The culture dictates that they should be concerned about the welfare of others and not just of their own welfare and that of their immediate family members.

First of all I give concluding remarks on blackness, education, pride in cultural values, and these women’s identity both in Anglophone West Africa and in the United States. Secondly, I reflect on the methodology, narrative research, and its suitability for my study. I also reflect on themes that set me thinking during the course of this study. I identify the following themes: the self versus the other, Anglophone West African women’s interaction with people from other backgrounds in the United States, the notion of “home,” the culture of silence, and the children that Anglophone West African women give birth to and raise in the United States. Finally, in this chapter, I make recommendations for further studies. Even though this is a small study with only a sample of Anglophone West African women, the findings open several areas for further research.

### **Conclusions**

I interviewed five women from four of the five Anglophone West African countries. Two of the women come from Ghana, one each from Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These five women present a small sample and would not speak for all the women from Anglophone West Africa. Furthermore, these women are highly educated women as they are all university students. They are the elite from this part of the world where education is neither free nor universal, and the education of girls is not given a high priority for economic and cultural reasons. All of the women in my study are

Christians, but the research on women in Anglophone West Africa reveals that women from this part of the world whether they are Muslims, Christians, or practice various African religions have faith in a higher power (Nsonwu, 2008).

Although my research participants are educated women and voluntary immigrants to the United States, they face similar experiences as illiterate immigrants and refugees with the issue of their skin color being the first consideration of how they are identified in America. Besides, they are grouped with African Americans and other black people in the diaspora. The negative stereotypes ascribed to American Blacks are extended to them. As Maalouf (2000) asserts, “Identity can’t be compartmentalized” (p. 2); the women reject this identity based on their skin color and redefine themselves highlighting the multiple aspects of their identity and the differences between them and African Americans. They also reject African Americans who position themselves as “the Blacks in America.” My study explores what it means to be an Anglophone West African woman, a black woman, in America. There are several viewpoints on the issue of blackness, which have created tensions in the United States. I briefly recapture them.

### **Blackness**

Who decides who is black in the United States? The first African slaves who arrived in Virginia in the 1600s were referred to as “negroes.” This term was used for people of African descent for a very long time. Later, the term “colored” was used for Americans of African descent. Later still, in the 1960s these Americans self-identified and started calling themselves Blacks.

The term “black” rapidly replaced “Negro” in general usage in the United States as the black power movement peaked at the end of the 1960s, but the black and Negro populations are the same. The term “black” is used in this book [Who is black? One nation’s definition] for persons with any black African lineage, not just for unmixed members of populations from sub-Saharan Africa. (Davis, 1991)

Some preferred the term “African Americans” to distinguish themselves from white Americans. So the term black is one that does not have only to do with the skin color of this group of people, but more so with a whole identity of a certain group of people in America.

The United States government, in its Fourteenth Census in 1920 used the “one drop rule” to distinguish “pure-blooded whites” from non-whites instead of using the term “mulatto,” which was regarded as an offensive term for people with both black and white ancestors (Davis, 1991). Shelby (2005) explains the one drop rule as “the social criterion for disambiguating racial identity that holds that a person is black if she or he is known to have at least one black ancestor” (p. 124). Davis explains the American context

Because blacks are defined according to the one-drop rule, they are a socially constructed category in which there is wide variation in racial traits and therefore not a race group in the scientific sense. However, because that category has a definite status position in the society it has become a self-conscious social group with an ethnic identity. (Davis, 1991)

It is from this standpoint that Anglophone West African women have been told that they are not black.

Being a black woman here, it’s also a different story because I have had several people telling me that I am not Black. I hear it all the time from a lot of my

friends because to them, they feel like there is something different between Black and African. To them, Black means African American and African means plain African. So by that definition, I can't be Black. And I beg to differ on that. Because clearly, I am Black and I am from Africa, which is the home of all black people in essence, so I don't see how somebody from Africa could be told that they are not black. *Yet, I hear it all the time.* So I kind of struggle with that identity because sometimes, I don't want to be labeled as a BLACK woman in the sense of what racial or post racial America has decided a black woman is and the burden that she carries because African American women and African women, not to generalize, but have a lot of differences, even though there are several ways in which we intersect. (Afafa from Ghana)

The above quotation from one of my study participants sums up the feelings of many Anglophone West African women regarding their identity as Black in the United States.

In this study I set out to investigate how Anglophone West African women understand what it means to be black in America and how blackness relates to their race, gender, education, family and religion. In short, how their being black is the central aspect of how they are regarded in society. But as the study has shown, these women would claim that black people originate from Africa, but they do not hinge their identity to the color of their skin or the constructs of blackness in the United States. According to all known definitions of blackness they qualify for people who are identified as Black. However, in the United States, because of the negative stereotypes associated with black people, they strive to separate their identity from other black people by stressing their continent of origin or country of origin. For example, they may insist on being regarded as Africans or as Nigerians/Ghanaians/Sierra Leoneans/Liberians.

## Pride in Cultural Values

Afafa remarks

I always felt that I didn't realize I was African until I was not in Africa any longer. I always knew that I was Ghanaian, and Akan and Ashanti and tied to these specific tribes even within my country but I never really took on the identity of African the other fifty three countries in the continent didn't seem like they made that much of a difference in my life. Like until college, I could not have drawn the African map and labeled all the countries. But now I feel some sort of ownership over the title African and I have come to be okay with that because, you know, after something has been thrust on you a couple of times, you have to sit down and think about it and say, you know what, actually, it is not a bad thing, it is true. It is what I am. I want to take that title and make it into something positive even in your eyes, because I think it's something that is wonderful and I want you to recognize that too.

She identifies herself as Akan and Ashanti within her country, Ghana. However, she came to accept the identity as an African in the United States. Despite the negative portrayal of Africa, especially in the American media, which I believe is what Afafa refers to when she says, "making it into something positive," she rejects the connotations ascribed to her African identity, accepts the identity as an African and wants to recreate this identity with positive values. Iya identifies herself as a Krio from Sierra Leone. She spent some time in her narrative recounting incidents of her mother instilling in her and her siblings that it is important to uphold their culture. Apart from making sure she knew "how to cook the food, how to dance the dance, how to play the music, you know, how to like experience the culture because she [the mother] is a firm believer that if the woman in the household knows, the whole household knows." Iya goes on to say

There are certain ways of how you carry yourself, certain ways how it's stressed and not like in American culture as it is just from Sierra Leone or African women

in general or just how you are expected to act. It's just very different. Like how you went to a party—the amount of self-confidence that you are expected to have.

It is very typical for Anglophone West African women in the United States to be proud of their identity because of their rich heritage, the positive aspects they demonstrate as black women, and their education.

### **Education**

All the women in this study stress the importance of education. They do not only speak for themselves, but they also speak for their immediate family members, and for their societies. Iya's mother stresses the need for her to focus on her education. Afafa wishes that the type of education in the United States was available to all children in Ghana. Yata wants to help others get an education in Liberia. Olu-Ola cannot understand why students in the United States do not make the most of the education offered them in this country, and Effie advocates for the focus of education to be the education of girls instead of boys.

Furthermore, these feelings on education are not restricted to the women in my study and the millions in this part of the world from which they come. Others have acknowledged the high premium given to education in Africa, and the advocacy for the education of girls. The United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) was launched in 2000 at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, West Africa. Its aim is to reduce the discrimination of girls in the educational system and give them equal access to education at all levels. Different regions have implemented different strategies to ensure

that girls are given a fair chance at getting basic education and having access to all levels of education.

I posit that when Anglophone West African women consider education in Africa, they see it as the means of getting out of poverty, and they use education for economic and social mobility. When in the United States, these women think that an added value of education is to counter negative stereotypes. Effie, for example, believes that education, not demonstrations, will make Blacks more respected and be perceived positively in society.

Coming from a situation where the basic necessities are hard to come by, and for those from war-torn areas, where living in a safe environment is a luxury, and where getting basic education is a high privilege, the women in my study cannot understand how so many in the United States take education for granted. These five women are aware of their elite status and attribute their receiving scholarships to attend prestigious universities to their high academic achievements. When Africans do get the opportunity to be educated, most take their education seriously and work hard at being the best that they can be. Robinson (2010) states,

Here is a supreme historical irony: For nearly two hundred years, Africans were kidnapped brought here in chains, forced to work without pay, bought and sold like pieces of property, and deliberately kept untutored and illiterate for fear that knowledge would make them uncontrollable and dangerous. Today, Africans coming here voluntarily on wide-body jets are the best-educated immigrants in the United States—better educated than Asians, Europeans, Latin Americans, or any other regional group. (pp. 165–166)

The importance of education in Anglophone West Africa, especially the education of girls is borne out by my research. The women from Anglophone West Africa hold education as the key to solving their problems back home and in the United States.

### **Women in Anglophone West Africa and in the United States**

Two of my study participants mentioned that women from Anglophone West Africa are to be “obedient and submissive.” Even though my study participants did not clearly state their own position on women being “obedient and submissive” and to whom, I know that they were referring to women being obedient and submissive to their husbands. Children, in general, are brought up to respect adults. Girls, in particular, are to obey their fathers and later on, as women, they are expected to obey their husbands and submit to them. This expectation, I contend, is not accepted by the majority of Anglophone West African women: rich or poor, young or old, educated or uneducated.

Some women stand up for themselves and challenge patriarchy; others find subtle ways of driving their point home. Here are some examples: Anecdotes from women in some societies in Anglophone West Africa whose husbands squander their household resources by gambling or drinking have been known to get together and go to their husbands’ place of work at the end of the month or a pay period and demand their husbands’ salaries from either the employers or from the husbands themselves. Each woman would then apportion the money for the family’s rent, food, and clothing and would give the husband an allowance. In the documentary, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, which chronicles how ordinary Liberian women came together and banded to end the civil war in their country and bring peace to the nation, the women, among other

strategies, pledged to withhold intimacy from their husbands and also threatened to strip naked in public if their demands were not met. Their actions played a large part in ensuring that the peace talks in Ghana were actually held and in ending the war in Liberia. Some Anglophone West African women who are Christians omit the section of their marriage vows which asks them to “to honor and obey” their husbands.

In the United States where the Anglophone West African women have economic power, they use this power to reign in their husbands or partners with or without group solidarity. They are able to have a voice in how their hard earned cash is spent, how much money is sent back to their countries, “home,” and who gets sponsored to come and join them in the United States. With the exception of those women who send for their male children, boyfriends or husbands, in my experience, women send for other women to join them. The subtle and not so subtle ways that they create and recreate their identity at home and in the United States have served them well.

### **Reflections**

In this section, I reflect on narrative research and the suitability of this methodology for my study, “the self” versus “the other,” Anglophone West African women’s interaction with people from other backgrounds in the United States, the notion of “home,” the culture of silence, and the children that Anglophone West African women give birth to and raise in the United States.

### **Narrative Research**

Narrative research helped me to capture the feelings of the women I interviewed as they spoke. Their body language also throws light on the information they were

sharing with me. The methodology of narrative research to collect life stories using the prompt, “Tell me the story of your life” is very effective and rich because when participants talk about themselves, they give aspects of their lives that are important to them. They may also tell the researcher what she had not even thought of to ask. For example, I would not have thought of asking my research participants about their sexual orientations or that of others. Two of the participants in my study spoke about lesbians from completely different perspectives.

One thing I found out using this methodology is that it is crucial for the interviewer to have prepared specific questions relating to her research to ask the interviewee before she starts the interview. It is not enough for a researcher to conduct an interview using the single prompt, “Tell me the story of your life,” because it is not guaranteed that the research participant will supply information related to the study or as much as the interviewer would like to know on specific aspects connected with her study. One of the participants in my study, Yata, from Liberia, gave me only six sentences on the story of her life. She stated her birth date, her country of origin and stressed that she was born in a terrible country. She then gave me the number of siblings she has, why her parents brought her to the United States and her course of study. After which, she said, “I don’t know what else to talk about. So you can ask me questions and I will tell you.” She wanted me to ask her specific questions, which I did.

Even though I interviewed only a small number of women whose stories I collected, transcribed and analyzed, the findings of this study will have wider

implications for not only Anglophone West African women, but also for similar groups of black women in the diaspora, immigrants in the United States, and many others.

### **The Self versus the Other**

There are several instances when the participants I interviewed identified the *Self* and separated the *Self* from *the Other*. Do we as human beings always need the *Other* to validate the *Self*? Is this a natural human tendency? Understandably, when I asked the women to tell me the story of their lives, they each spoke about themselves, the *Self*. When I asked them specific questions, they moved from the *Self* to the *Other*. At times, they did not see themselves as being part of that *Other*. For example, when they spoke about women, even though they themselves are women, they did not, for most of the time, include themselves in this group. When they included themselves as part of a group, that group is either glorified or becomes the victims. Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) state

How individuals recount their histories—what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience—all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (p. 1)

This is supported by my research participants. I believe that it is only through the existence of the *Other* that the *Self* comes into being. Casey informs, “According to Bakhtin, it is only in relation to the other that the self can be defined” (1993, p. 23). Afafa, one of the two participants from Ghana, hints at this when she gives an example on race.

I feel like the term [Black] did come from difference. There wouldn't have been a reason to call anybody Black if nobody was White. Because, in Africa, most people are Black—you don't really hear the word "black" at all. So because we don't use the word, majority of us are Black anyway. We use White more because if somebody walked in, I would just say a man came here. If he happened to be Caucasian, I would specify, in Africa, and say, oh, a white man came here. So you never really hear Black, because that's the assumed, you know, identity.

Here, Afafa only makes the distinction between the *Self* and the *Other*. But when Iya makes the distinction between the *Self* and the *Other*, the *we/us* and *they/them*, it is with the added inference that the *Self* is better, more worthy, and has more value than the *Other*. She says

I feel that I find my Sierra Leonean women friends have this high level of confidence like everyone around me. I am a strong, beautiful, black woman, you know, that you don't necessarily get when you talk to other people like when you talk to other, especially American girls, or like people from other countries.

Is this to say that only Sierra Leonean women or the Sierra Leonean women around Iya have "this high level of confidence"? Also, she says about her mother

At a very early age she made the distinction clear between us and them. She was like, "no, you don't do that. Even if you see them, you don't do that [whatever is not acceptable]. You treat yourself always with respect; you treat yourself always with a higher class than others."

While it is a good thing to instill self confidence in one's children, teaching them to be elitist, "to treat [the self] with a higher class than others" will not help them to be accepting of others in our global society. However, these two examples, in light of the situation in which Iya's mother finds herself raising her black, African children in a racist

country, can be interpreted as her way of instilling in her children the pride that should counteract the negative stereotypes ascribed to people of their skin color.

### **Anglophone West African Women Interacting with People from Other Cultures**

Iya uses the term “self-segregate” when she spoke about African American students at her university. These black students, African Americans, come on campus a week before the entire freshman class. They are hosted by black families and other black students. So since this was their first introduction to the campus, these black students made friends with other black students and stuck together. Iya says, “It’s just like they self-segregate because they hang out with other students, other black students. We have [The University has] different events that kind of reinforce that. [The University has] black students’ invitation only.” She deplors this self-segregation. However, even though she has friends from different educational levels, she gives me the impression that she and her family stick to people from their ethnic background.

The other women in my study also seem to stay with people from their background. Afafa speaks about having friends with whom she has “shared experiences,” friends who have something “other than American.” Effie said that she used to “hang out with African and Caribbean” students until she was forced to interact with other people outside this group when she went to work. She confessed that “You stick to what you know and what you are comfortable with.” Olu-Ola tries to understand why she could not relate to white people. She explains

Being a Nigerian, a black person, I don’t really have too many interactions with a lot of white people. I don’t know if it is because I don’t choose to or because I just

feel like there is some sort of like, not . . .—I don't know. There is just sort of something, there is a barrier there that keeps me from relating with them.

Arthur (2009), writing about African women immigrants in the United States, attempts to explain this divide. He states,

Some of the immigrant women maintain minimum contacts with a cross-section of the host society. A common reason accounting for this is the women's perception that they continue to experience subtle and, at times, overt forms of racial oppression due to their race and ethnic background. (pp. 109–110)

These women come from countries in which they were the *crème de la crème*. They now find themselves in situations where they have not only lost that status but also now have to deal with a new and foreign phenomenon—race and *otherness*. They come from communities where they were not discriminated against and where they identified as *Self* and may have discriminated against the *Other*. This study shows that Anglophone West African women in the United States tend to stick to people from similar backgrounds and do not branch out much to those from other backgrounds unless situations force them to do so.

### **Home**

Two of the participants in my study speak of going back “home.” When these Anglophone West African women use the word “home,” which they did very often in their narratives, they refer to their country of origin and, more specifically, their place of birth. Home is important to them because this is the place where they have their roots in their religion, family (dead or alive), and community. These two women were born and raised in Anglophone West Africa. Afafa says, “Every year, twice a year, I go home.”

Effie says, “Even now, sometimes, I go home ....When I go back home and visit, I do see quite a lot of different things.” For these two women Ghana is home.

Whereas the two of my participants who are Ghanaians and grew up in Ghana use the term “home,” the other three use the term, “my country,” when they speak, and “home” when they quote their parents. Yata does not seem to regard Liberia as home probably because even though she was born in Liberia, she was displaced as a child when she and her family moved to a neighboring country because of the war in Liberia and because of the terrible experiences she had in Liberia when she returned after a few years. She states, “Right now, I am trying to open up like a non-profit organization in my country.” Olu-Ola who left Nigeria when she was seven years old, in talking about the first time she went back to Nigeria says

But in my mind, you know, I knew that from what I remember, Nigeria was not like America and I guess for me, I was still eager to go. You know, my parents always told me that that is always home and you are here to get a better education. You can go back home and fix your home. You are not here to stay here. I guess that was the mindset that I always had.

Iya, who left Sierra Leone at the age of three, can only relate to Sierra Leone through her parents and family members. She too, does not use the word “home” for Sierra Leone, but her parents do. For Iya, home is her family residence in the United States. “When I go back home, my mom and dad joke and say this is not my home. Immediately you guys grow up we are going back home to Sierra Leone.” Whether they do or not is another question.

There is a dearth of research on whether Anglophone West African women in the United States return to their countries of origin. Anecdotal findings on this issue of going back home are mixed. Some of these women do not want to go back because of the political instability in the region and they also feel that they can be of more help to their kith and kin by being here in the United States. Their “cultural altruism” ( Robinson, 2010) prevents them from going back. Others are nostalgic for home and actually return home. Still others, especially those who are naturalized Americans, find the happy medium by spending part of the year with their relatives back home and the other part with their children and grandchildren in the United States.

### **Culture of Silence**

Afafa narrated that she did not know about the fact that her parents had had previous marriages and remarked that she guessed it was “some sort of African culture of silence when it comes to telling children about ‘adult decisions.’” I suppose that things that did not directly concern the children or their welfare should not be important to them. Also, the issue of respect plays a role in this. Asking what adults believe were “unnecessary questions” was not tolerated. In fact, children were “to be seen and not heard.” In this part of the world, children are raised in an authoritarian way, which by and large is not what we see in the United States. As Effie mentioned, when she has conversations with her mother, the mother would refuse to consider any point of view other than the one she holds. Even though Effie is now an adult her mother is still “the adult” who should not be argued with. She says

Anytime my mom and I are talking and we have different opinions and this is my opinion especially when I think that I am right and she is wrong, but never wants to admit she is wrong, she'll just say, well now you have an opinion for everything and that's how the argument ends.

Children were silenced both at home and in school. They had to accept what their parents or teachers tell them without questioning. We have a saying that was used very often when I was growing up, which goes, *buk nor dei lai* [the book does not lie] an affirmation of the authenticity of the written word, the Gospel Truth! Students from this background, with the exception of the bravest (the non-conformists), do not challenge their teachers. They soak up all the "knowledge" they could get from their teachers with the hope that they can regurgitate this information when called upon.

The culture of silence is also observed in Yata's narrative when she mentions the atrocities and killings that took place during the war in Liberia. She reiterates the fact that there was silence as "no one talks about it," "nobody ever talked about it." I also believe that it is this culture of silence that prevented Effie from explaining to the African American students on her campus why she and other international students did not take part in a march organized to protest the February 4, 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, a West African immigrant who was shot numerous times by plain-clothes New York City police officers. Amadou Diallo was unarmed at the time of the shooting and this sparked outrage. Effie explains to me

There was a big protest going on in New York, so a bunch of people were leaving from my college to take part in that protest. This was mainly organized by the African American Association. So, sometime after the protest, the two organizations [The African American Association and the African and Caribbean Association] had a joint meeting and the African Americans were very mad at us,

particularly the West Africans because they were saying this was a fellow West African who got dealt this injustice and they organized a trip to go and none of us Africans joined them to go on this trip to the protest.

At the time of this meeting the African students did not explain the reason for their non-participation, Effie says, “You know, I am here on a visa and I go protest or whatever, something goes down, I get arrested. I am being deported back to Ghana and it’s just that simple. You know, I’m not American; I can’t fight some of these battles.” The African students kept silent. This creates misunderstanding between the African American students and the African students. It is, therefore, important for there to be discussions and honest dialogue for understanding.

I commend the students at Effie’s university who went on the march in protest of Amadou Diallo’s killing. Effie, however, says, “The best way is not for you to stand there and scream and protest.” She believes that having a good education will help influence and change people’s thinking. She states

And to me, the best way of fighting racism anywhere and I still believe that is true, and I know this is not always an option but I am in the situation where I can get the education and get myself basically in a place of influence, and somehow take away that misconception that black people, we are not smart, we are lazy and all that misconception that people have.

While it is true that having a good education *may* change some people’s thinking about Blacks being stupid and lazy, history, up to the present day in 2013, has shown that diehard racists would stick to their misconceptions even in the face of hard facts to the contrary.

### **Children of Anglophone West African Women Born in the United States**

As I did the research on Anglophone West African women in the United States, I noticed the difference between the older Anglophone West African women and the younger ones. Even though all of these women come from a region and culturally share a lot in common, they have differences. This makes me reflect on the differences between these women and their children born in the United States some of whom have never been to West Africa. How do these children experience being black in the United States? Do they lean to popular culture and identify more with African Americans or do they still anchor their blackness to their rich cultural heritage in Africa? How do they “experience” this rich culture?

Iya, who left Sierra Leone at the age of three, opens a window into this situation. Her mother finds opportunities for the family to interact with people from their background here in the United States, in England and in Sierra Leone. I have discussed how Anglophone West African women sponsor older women—mothers, aunts, cousins—to take care of their children for short periods of time or to live with them permanently. These women help to pass on the culture to children. Do these children get the rich culture from their parents and the older generation who were born and raised in Anglophone West Africa? Do they straddle different cultures and take on a completely new identity? Do they get sucked up in the American pluralistic culture and reject the “cultural altruism” (Robinson, 2010) of their parents? We do not know. Takougang (2003) writing on African immigrants in America states

Consequently, they are fast learning how to live the American dream; they are becoming involved in their communities, starting small businesses, and participating in local politics. Their children are becoming professional football, baseball and basketball players. They are also becoming highly trained professionals who are employed in both the public and private sectors. What the future holds for the continued flow of African migration to the United States is unclear. But from all indications it appears that African migration, immigration, and integration into American political, social and economic spheres will continue. (p. 5)

One thing that is clear though, is that if these children born to Anglophone West African women in the United States would like to call the United States “home” they would need to be active in politics and other aspects of society, and unlike their parents, join forces with other Blacks in the diaspora and African Americans to give positive interpretations of what it means to be Black in America.

### **Recommendations**

This study has discussed Anglophone West African women in the United States and how blackness has played a central role in their identity in the American society. One of the surprises I had from this study as I reviewed the literature and interviewed my participants was the sense of ownership of the term “black” by Africans and African Americans. Both sets of black people feel strongly about this term. For the African Americans, the thinking is that they are “the Blacks” at the head of the line that all other black people coming to the United States should follow. For the Africans, the thinking is that all black people come from Africa so they are legitimately the owners of the term. I recommend more research into the many black experiences in the United States.

The dearth of research in the area of out migration of women from Anglophone West Africa makes it important for Anglophone West African governments to carry out

research on the effects on their countries of women who leave. If governments do not take steps to provide for the safety and economic well-being of their citizens, especially their women and children, more and more women would out migrate. I recommend studies in this area and strategies from these countries for women who settle abroad to contribute their expertise even for short periods of time to their respective countries. This recommendation needs urgent attention because if the proposal by the United States to attach a green card to graduates in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields becomes reality, these Anglophone West African countries will lose many more of their educated citizens, especially their women.

It is also important for Anglophone West African women to write about their experiences both in West Africa and in the United States for posterity. Without active and structured documentation, the rich cultures of people from this part of the world may be lost. The onus is on the educated few who have lived in both worlds and once they have the basic necessities in life should carve out time for such projects. What these women have to offer their host country and not what they are deemed to be taking from it should be highlighted. The resilience of these women who have made it to the United States and continue to cope regardless of adverse conditions is worth studying and sharing. I recommend that not only should Anglophone West African women write about their rich cultures but that they collaborate with African American women whose experiences have paved the way for the relative ease with which black people now settle in the United States. For as bell hooks recommends, “Together, black women can renew our commitment to black liberation struggle, sharing insights and awareness, sharing feminist

thinking and feminist vision, building solidarity” (1990, pp. 48-49). Black women here should not be limited to African American women but all women who identify as black women.

My study participants are all educated women and in universities in the country, but I found out from the study that they exist in “ethnic clustering” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 19). They do not make a conscious effort to get to know their host country or use the opportunity they have away from their cultural background to expand their horizons. They have tunnel vision, focusing on their academic education and living in a world of their own individuality. The fact that these women in my study will not get to know others outside of their comfort zones make me recommend several strategies, curricular and extra-curricular, at the universities, to intervene and put the declarations of these universities (usually found in mission statements) of “diversifying their student body,” “preparing their students for a global society” to concrete actions.

For the curriculum, I recommend the following: (a) courses at the general education level that deal with cross-cultural issues; (b) foreign-born-and-raised faculty and American-born faculty without much international experience team teaching courses; (c) more distance education courses with partner institutions especially in West Africa; (d) group assignments—group members should come from different parts of the world and from different states in the country; and (e) professors spending five minutes of each face-to-face or virtual class time highlighting one current news item and asking students to comment on it from different cultural perspectives.

For extra-curricular activities, I recommend the following: (a) offices responsible for the affairs of international students identify an American-born and raised student buddy for each international student and monitor or check on their interactions and encourage them to at least meet at set intervals; (b) encourage clubs on campus to have discussions on cultural issues, for example on blackness especially at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) where “black” is understood as African American; (c) encourage West African students to write articles on their background and culture for their university newspaper; and (d) reward student organizations that promote programs that are inclusive of others. This does not mean relinquishing the ethos of their organizations.

I propose research at this level into how students from Africa and from other places very different from the United States settle at these universities. If black people who come to the United States do not interact with other black people or white people for that matter, until they need to make inroads in the society, research is needed that would help people to understand each other, regardless of needs, because of the global society in which we live.

The participants in this study on Anglophone West African women in the United States have honed in the importance of education and especially the education of girls. As research into education both in Anglophone West Africa and the United States is conducted, I recommend the kind of research that aligns education with real world issues such as social justice, human dignity, community, hope, and peace.

## POSTSCRIPT

This postscript comes as a result of the discussions during my oral defense of the dissertation. My committee members and I discussed, among other topics, the salience of different names for one's identity; cosmopolitanism and the intellectually displaced person; the tensions between Africans and African Americans, which usually go unnoticed; and black identity. I would like to recapture this discussion for my readers.

When asked what name I would give to my identity, it became clear to me that identity is not static and that we give a name to our identity depending on our situation. For example, I always knew that I was a Krio as opposed to another ethnic group in my country. I took on the identity of a Sierra Leonean when I had a passport to travel out of Sierra Leone. I do not believe that in Sierra Leone, I would ever have said, "I am a Sierra Leonean." When did I become an African? I am not sure, but I speculate that the few times that I have identified as an African were the times out of Sierra Leone when those I was talking to could not place Sierra Leone in their mental geography. At such times, I suppose, it was easier to use Africa as the place to which I can pin my identity for someone who has never heard of the country so as to distinguish myself from a woman from the Caribbean Islands—Haiti, Jamaica—or from South America, for example. Not being an African American, if asked whether I am an American, I would probably say that I am an American citizen or a naturalized American. Most of the time, I find myself

saying, “I come from Sierra Leone,” or “I am a Sierra Leonean by birth.” What does this say about identity in terms of locating ourselves in “a physical environment”?

This brought us to the discussion of a global citizen or a cosmopolitan citizen. What do we mean by these terms? What do colleges and universities mean when they say that they would like to prepare their students to become “global citizens”? This term “global citizen/ cosmopolitan citizen” is considered a negative and “unpatriotic” by some. We discussed philosophers, such as Kwame Appiah and Martha Nussbaum, who have written on the subject, and we wondered whether being a cosmopolitan citizen is not tantamount to being a displaced or “homeless person.” What does cosmopolitanism do to our identity? I believe that the more we learn and the more exposed we are to other cultures and peoples, the more groundless/rootless we become. We may deny it, but this does not mean that the phenomenon does not exist. The views of Zygmunt Bauman on this topic were mentioned.

The term “homeless cosmopolitan” came up in our discussion. We seriously considered and discussed whether the more an individual ventures out, the more difficult it is for that individual to define a place as “home.” What is our concept of home? Is home a physical place, a birthplace, or a place in our heads? Having moved out of one location are we changed by that move? Are we satisfied with the new physical place we live in or is there nostalgia for the old? Do we ever go back to the old and find out that it is not as we left it? Is everybody then not homeless?

Another topic we discussed at great length was the tension between Africans and African Americans that my study participants brought up. African Americans tend to

keep to themselves and do not venture out of their comfort zones. As one of my study participants put it, “They self-segregate.” Many African American students, for example, do not want to travel abroad or study abroad. Even if financial constraints were not a factor, many still “fear the world.” Does this stem from distrust of “the unknown”? Is this mistrust also manifested in their caution of making friends with people outside their close network? These are questions that should be raised in conversations.

Apart from the ownership and rights to the term “black,” which I wrote about in the dissertation, I posit that the tension also stems from each group feeling superior to the other. African Americans feel superior to Africans because they see Africans from a deficit perspective, which stems from the knowledge of the poverty in Africa, the negative images in the press, and the “culture/cultural practices” of many Africans. Even when African Americans encounter Africans who negate these held stereotypes, they do not change their lenses. Their biases become bare when they do not audit their feelings. The Africans also feel superior to African Americans because many Africans feel they are more educated, more culturally diverse than African Americans. Africans have also bought into the stereotyping of African Americans in regards to underachieving academically. They cannot understand why African Americans do not take advantage of educational opportunities when they do not, for example, have to study daily by candlelight or take their chairs to school as in the case of many African children who strive to achieve under hard conditions. Africans do not stop to learn about the history of African Americans as a people and their struggles, which go on, on a daily basis to combat racism. The subtle and sometimes blatant discrimination that an African

American may detect, may be completely lost on an African who has not been “black in America” for generations. Without honest dialogue and a willingness to learn from each other, the tensions will continue.

I also talked about my feelings that discussions on blackness seem to be from an American-centric perspective. The “default” is African American. The discussion then becomes how other Blacks fit into this concept of blackness. The majority of writers on black issues approach the topic from where they find themselves. This is perfectly understandable because we can only branch out from our perspectives. What I think is needed, is for more writers to speak their minds on how they view the concept of “blackness.” We may not agree with Franz Fanon, but, he, at least, left us a legacy with the writings in his two books, *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, which have opened spaces for heated discussions that make the blood of some boil!

Researchers, especially those engaged in ethnographic studies, are themselves changed and have shifts in perspectives, without even realizing it, during and after their research. This research has brought about for me what some scholars term the “pedagogy of interruption.” After an experience, one never goes back to the state one was in before the experience. I have come to a different understanding of aspects on “blackness” I never considered.

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