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How African Immigrants Perceive Blackness Within the American Ideality: The Sensory Woman Art Installation

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How African Immigrants Perceive Blackness Within the American Ideality: The Sensory

Woman Art Installation

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

Communications

Honors Student

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Thesis Advisor

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Portland State University

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Abstract

This honors thesis project aimed to create a multi-sensory mural that nods to the African immigrant experience and the overarching themes of idealistic American values. The purpose of this project aims to give visual and aural representation to the perceptions of African Immigrants on American societal issues/ideologies including topics such as; the lived experience of immigrating, the individual relationships Africans hold towards the subject of immigration, and how community and tribalism are closely interwoven with immigration. The guiding question behind my thesis is: How does the ideality of America become perceived and internalized through the eyes of African immigrants? The importance of this topic is held in understanding how the communication of ideals impacts lived immigration experiences, and to learn if Black minorities who weren't raised in America feel a connection to Black-American social struggles. This project will be displayed through a one-day, creative art installation with a large-scale painting/aural experience as its primary medium.

Overview

Throughout the field of communication, and interdisciplinary among the vast areas of focus within Social Science, there is a discussion on perception and pursuit of further understanding of people's lived experiences. This study is focused on researching the differences in perceptions/lived experiences between African immigrants and Black Americans when it comes to social issues and racial disparities. This topic of interest is a burgeoning focus in many different ethnic, psychology, and social science studies.

This thesis prospectus aims to cultivate a picture of African immigrants' experiences and perspectives on societal issues in the US that have been popularized by Black American communities. The importance of this study lies in understanding oppression transference, and how the racial climate of North America can color the viewpoints of immigrants not privy to the generational pain and suffering of the African Diaspora. This thesis aims to learn if African immigrants who weren't raised in North America and weren't exposed to common racial oppression feel a personal connection to Black American social struggles.

My ideal outcome for this project would be to; learn more about how African heritage presents in America and within immigrant communities, highlight the social differences and similarities of these communities, create a visually striking mural that can help to generate additional conversations around immigration and racial equity work, and continue to explore African communities and eventually publish more research on micro-minority cultures within the U.S.

In looking at the applicability of my creative thesis, I imagine using my project as a point of discussion and reflection with community members at Portland State University on the importance of deepening your understanding of yourself. I want to delve into the topic of identity

and be able to hold reflective discourse on questions surrounding identity, and how the study of it presents itself in academic spaces. My creative thesis is important because deepening ones understanding of identity is an integral part of self-awareness and in turn, critical leadership development. I want to live the practice of creativity in academia and facilitating that experience is a critical point I want to make in my leadership development practice.

The idea of belonging is an incredibly multifaceted discussion (both specific to my African Immigrant study and broader to the existential experience of existing). The essence of this project is to look at common themes around belonging, and finding spaces in higher education to be creative and more malleable/dynamic with rigorously academic materials than they are traditional. This line of questioning are the kinds of conversations I will attempt to spark with this project. I hope that members of the academic community will be interested in seeing the piece and interacting with it once it's displayed on our campus, allowing for a chance to have organic conversations around the pieces symbolism and meaning to those who inquire during its installation period.

Methodology

Materials

The productions needed in the installation piece were varied, and multi-textured. In attempting to make the mural as kinesthetic as possible, I used a range of materials to create a 3D quality to "The Sensory Woman." Her headscarf was created by cutting and stripping wax paper into thin, symmetrical strips that were crumpled and attached using a sealing glue. I used both acrylic and oil paints layered over a several week period to create the illusion of textured skin, lips, and eyes. I also used charcoal, high-pigment oil crayons, and foiled gold in addition to the

paints. The mural was 10 feet tall and approximately 16 feet wide. Refer to Appendix A for a reference picture of the mural.

Installation Process

The thesis took roughly two and a half months to successfully complete, and went through various processes to assemble it. The mural was in 10 separate pieces that were stitched together at the installation site to create the overall visage. There were buttons installed to the wall that participants could press to listen to detailed lived experiences of four Cameroonians express their perceptions on immigration and American Ideality in their native languages of Bassa and French. There was also interactive Cameroonian instruments participants could engage with and use during the exhibit, and artifacts (including traditional masks, statues, and figures).

Annotated Bibliography

Bryce-Laporte, R. S. (1972). Black immigrants: The experience of invisibility and inequality.

Journal of Black Studies, 3(1), 29-56.

Roy Simon Bryce-Laporte focuses on analyzing the differences between the lived experiences of Black Americans and African Immigrants within the USA. This kind of research approach can be taken either nature of qualitative or quantitative, with Laporte's article focusing on the qualitative aspect (1972). Laporte's article highlights some of the challenges African Immigrants face when they migrate to the US, which is an important vein to touch upon when researching immigrants' lived experiences (1972). Laporte isn't so specific as to compare the sub-cultures and African immigrants, but discusses the more universal circumstances of African immigrants. Laporte focused on the inequality immigrants from Africa face and writes about those inequalities stemming from different areas such as economics, housing, and job insecurity (1972).

Cole, E. R., & Omari, S. R. (2003). Race, class, and the dilemmas of upward mobility for

African Americans. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(4), 785-802.

In this article Elizabeth R. Cole and Safiya R. Omari focus on the different levels of social classes within Black American communities and how face-value factors like skin tone, hair texture, and other appearances can play a role in social class and experience (2003). Other deeper-rooted factors that play a role in social class were elements like Higher Education, location of living, and the monetary success of your parents (2003). The Black identity and disenfranchisement are well associated with the history of the United States, but Cole argues that this can be a misconception and that even though large swaths of 20th Century African Americans lived in squalor, there were still

examples of Black economic success that was much less popularized in history (2003). There are still differentiating factors that separate experience within the Black community, the most predominant factor being class (Cole, 2003). The groups of black people that have been able to accumulate wealth have existed and have formed exclusive organizations that did not appeal to the plights of a greater disenfranchised Black populous (Cole, 2003). They were advantaged by education, generational wealth, and networking opportunities that allowed for a much different lifestyle from the stereotypical Black man in American society at the time (Cole, 2003). This allows useful lenses to understand what factors may fundamentally shape experience and opinion. This article does a good job of comparing different facets of the Black American experience and discusses things that can influence one's lived experiences and some of the negative connotations of living within the United States. It focuses on the narratives of Black Americans which is an important part of this research since so much of this proposal's expression is based off of lived experiences.

Mbuli, M., & Makuwa, B. (2012). Deconstructing African identity and Black consciousness: A coconut, critical ontology defining Blackness. *International Journal of Psychology*, 47, 479-480.

This article touches on an important aspect of this research topic; how are race identity complexes progressing in the modern-day? This article finds that racial constructs heavily persist in the modern-day world (Mbuli, 2012). By changing the ideas that surround and justify racial constructs, the context they exist in changed both politically and socially (Mbuli, 2012). As well as being perpetuated by hardline realities such as institutional functioning (Mbuli, 2012). Mbuli writes that there is not an easy way out as the effects of

past realities persist because their effect echoes in the present-day times (2012). This brings up the argument of why racial identities are still used and not seen as archaic forms of identification. This study influences this research proposal on the base that some may still view race as relevant to their social struggle while others do not.

Tauriac, J., & Liem, J. (2012). Exploring the divergent academic outcomes of US-origin and immigrant-origin Black undergraduates. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(4), 244-258.

This study analyzes how well ethnically diverse Black people perform in school and how they integrate into the varied academic settings of higher education (2012). The study found a model that suggested that Black immigrants fared better than Black Americans (Tauriac, 2012). However, this model was adjusted, and the correlation no longer fit. It did find a correlation between social integration and academic integration (Tauriac, 2012). Integrating can often be determined by identity, and how these students are affected by their identity in terms of their integration (Tauriac, 2012). Tauriac ponders if there are factors that make the academic performance of one population better than another as well as the factors for why one population would integrate better than the other (2012). Tauriac's article works to assist this thesis because of its narrative on how identity and integration can affect one's success overall.

Daoud, N., English, S., Griffin, K., & George Mwangi, C. (2018). Beyond stereotypes:

Examining the role of social identities in the motivation patterns of Black immigrant and Black native students. *American Journal of Education*, 124(3), 285-312.

The research in this examined 48 students who racially identified as Black. It asked them what about their social identities and how/if that motivated their academic pursuits

(Daoud, et. al, 2012). This research found differences between the African immigrant students and the native-born Black Americans (2012). Knowing the motivations of these participants is important in understanding how much Black people look for economic mobility or for the acquisition of knowledge when it comes to education (Daoud, et. al, 2012). Although the difference that the article showed in participant answers could indicate many other factors, including showing what experience members of this study are having prior to answering the survey. This article recommends looking at ethnicity as a barometer for experience for future research, and could use further study.

Dapherede Otusanya, A., & Castle Bell, G. (2018). "I thought I'd have more trouble with White people!": Exploring racial microaggressions between West African immigrants and African Americans. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 19(1), 44-50.

This source will fit into the larger body of intersectional race theory and communication literature. Otusanya focuses on qualitative research methodology, which is an important aspect to analyze when working in an intercultural discipline (2018). Otusanya examines the three core forms of microaggressions: microinsult, microassault, and microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007, as cited in Dapherede Otusanya, Ayodeji, & Castle Bell, Gina, 2018). There were sixteen West-African immigrants interviewed, aging from the range of 18-60, that had experienced microaggressions from African Americans since moving to the United States. The motivators for the research stemmed from Otusanyas own West-African heritage and having personal experiences with microaggressions from the African American community. This research heavily relates to this thesis with the focus on the African immigrant perspectives on the American experience. While they use this perspective approach to look at what African immigrants have negatively

experienced by African Americans, this proposed study looks at how African immigrants relate to negative social issues African Americans face.

Davies, E., Suarez, Zulema, Samuel, Linda, & Washington, Tracee. (2015). Experiences of West African refugees' first five years of settlement in California. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*.

In this article, the experience of West African refugees who have settled in a particular area of California was examined through qualitative analysis. Twelve participants were interviewed to answer the four research questions of the study, using a phenomenological approach (Davies et al., 2015). The stories told by these refugees echoed the common themes of refugees' experiences, such as mental health issues and cultural conflicts, in addition to a variation of themes due to several factors that influence refugees' pattern of adaptation to their new environment (Davies et al., 2015). These factors included the refugees' personal resources, such as education and language fluency. This study also showed that there is a relationship between refugees' pre-departure experiences of instability, turmoil, and hardship and their strong determination to adapt to their new environment, as those who are positive-minded, resourceful, persistent, and tolerant will find adjusting to their new lives easier (Davies et al., 2015).

APPENDIX A

Mural reference photo:



Conclusion

As the child of an immigrant, My thesis is an homage to my heritage growing up in a cacophony of cultures and dialogues around identity and foreign notions surrounding the "American dream." The guiding question behind my thesis is: How does the ideality of America become perceived and internalized through the eyes of African immigrants?

The importance of this topic is held in understanding how the communication of ideals impacts lived immigration experiences, and to learn if Black minorities who weren't raised in America feel a connection to Black-American social struggles. This project will work in tandem with my honors thesis work and I'm excited to be able to express my topic through a creative medium such as this large-scale painting/aural experience.