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This is sweet but uncomfortable

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SECTION 3
Conducting identity work and relationship-building via autoethnography

Introduction

Deborah L. Mulligan

The eight chapters in this section of the handbook tease out the connections between life and research. The identities that we adopt (or those that are thrust upon us) have bearing on the relationships that we choose to explore, build and maintain within our research, within our professions and within our everyday lives. Autoethnography is uniquely placed as a means for this exploration. Identity work is an important facet of our lives as educationalists, and we should strive for self-exploration as a tool for improving and monitoring our relationships with ourselves and with those who are entrusted into our care academically.

In Chapter 15, James Akpan discusses impacts on his identity as he traversed two very different cultures. He interrogates the notion of autoethnography and its “welcoming aura” that enables him to embark on his exploration of self-in-context. The author examines his exposure to a tripolar identity that includes a Western White education, an African American experience and an African homeland.

In Chapter 16, Patrick Alan Danaher wrestles with his identity in transition as he completes one career chapter of his life in academia and muses about his future endeavours. While this transition generates feelings of fearfulness and uncertainty, those feelings are ameliorated by his deployment of autoethnographic analysis in concert with sense-making. In particular, the analysis is clustered around his present identity shift, informed by his longer-term identity work and relationship reshaping, and also by his traversing the personal–communal, private–public and self–other divides. He highlights the complex intersections among autoethnography, sense-making, identity (shift) work and relationship-building.

In Chapter 17, Gustavo González-Calvo presents his journey as a Spanish researcher who seeks to write in an evocative, critical and committed way. He warns the reader about the marginal and secondary status of qualitative and autoethnographic methodologies in Spain. The author considers it his moral obligation to try to make visible the political discourses, and the neoliberal and capitalist measures and dilemmas, facing university professors today. In telling his story, he reminds the reader that members of university institutions deserve to be considered as more than instruments that benefit neoliberal policies.
In Chapter 18, Arturo Pérez López and Patricia Varas explore Arturo’s self-reflection to discover his ethnic identity. Through his writing, Arturo constructs a narrative built of memories and experiences, supporting it with readings on language, music, ethnic identity formation, and cultural patterns of socialisation and interaction. In this autoethnography, Arturo embarks on an inclusive and informal method of learning and makes important connections with cultural, political and social sources that will prove important to him as a future researcher.

In Chapter 19, Ashley Simpson raises awareness about the concepts involved when enacting critical autoethnography in relation to Bakhtin’s dialogism and the crises of outsideness. He poses a number of questions that researchers may wish to consider when utilising this form of autoethnographic study. These questions have to do with ethical behaviour; the importance of the recognition of self; choice of methodological tools; social, political and economic ramifications of this type of research; and, finally, sensitivity to the multiplicity of voices, perspectives and identities of dialogism.

In Chapter 20, Devi Akella discusses being forced out of her comfort zone when she visited the conflicted region of Palestine as a Fulbright Specialist. The entire phenomenon is reproduced, deconstructed and reflected upon to reveal intricate social forces at play, learning experiences at work and with transformation of personality taking place. Foucault’s gaze ideology and situated learning are used to make sense of her perceptual blocks and the gradual change in her outlook over the course of her experience, and how this had an impact on her in the long run as a teacher and researcher.

In Chapter 21, Lynelle Watts and Rebecca Waters aim to outline different kinds of autoethnographic critical reflection. They explore some philosophical conceptions of practical identity and consider how these might inform understandings of the self at the heart of autoethnography. The authors begin by tracing the self-reflective nature of the human as a social being, and then they discuss conceptualisations of practical identity, outlining the connection between its personal and social aspects. They outline the role of narrative as essential to the formation of practical identities, and they conclude by exploring the implications for how the self might be represented within autoethnographic inquiry.

Finally in this section of the handbook, in Chapter 22, Emilio A. Anteliz and Paolo Maragno articulate what they propose as “the triple nexus” between identity work and relationship-building in relation to several continuing education programs that they developed in their Venezuelan university engineering faculty for working engineers. The first element of this nexus is the chapter’s conceptual framework. The second element is the principles underpinning the programs’ design and development. The third element is the authors’ reflections on their first experience of engaging in collaborative autoethnography.
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THIS IS SWEET BUT UNCOMFORTABLE

An autoethnography of being African in American classrooms

James Akpan

Introduction

I am male, African Black – and an ordained Roman Catholic priest from Akwa Ibom State. I believe it is because of the priesthood that I came overseas, and that the training I have received my entire life connects me with the Western world more than with my African homeland. But when I left Nigeria in 2014, my one intention was to spend just five years in the United States of America, doing graduate studies in psychology up to the doctorate level, and then going back home. [I tough love Nigeria, but I want this colonial name changed!] So, I dove straight into schooling six months after my arrival in Long Island, New York. Then came the shocking discovery: there is what is called “in-state” and “out-of-state” tuition! What? I was not up to 12 months in New York, so I wasn’t qualified for an in-state tuition. I was going to pay thrice the amount (almost $10,000 for 10 credits), which would be in millions when converted into Nigerian naira. How I navigated and survived such an initially cruel American academic world, moving from naivete to doctorate and incurring no debt, has formed the basis of this chapter. This initial roadblock is my “first critical incident”; I highlight four of these to share my experience using the autoethnographic method.

Prior to my coming to America, I had taught briefly in a Nigerian high (secondary) school between 2013 and 2014 where the major building, the class block in that school, was tagged “uninhabitable” (see Figure 15.1). Yet, as of 2021, that building was still in use with no renovation work whatsoever. Of course, I got my education up to my second bachelor’s (2009) in Nigeria, but in a seminary setting. Seminary training in Nigeria can be regarded as a shadow that prevents me from seeing, and doing something about, the darkness in secular educational settings in Africa. So, during my doctorate program, I visited Nigeria in the summer of 2021 and got an impromptu invitation to a graduation at an elementary school next door to my home. I must say I came out of that function with tears in my eyes after watching those young optimistic and vibrant hearts being schooled in a substandard environment. How would their mindset be challenged, inspired, and transformed in such a dilapidated structure, which was labelled a school? I bring these varied experiences to bear in this project. The Nigerian educational environment, in stark contrast to my American experience, has made my research very relevant.
The environmental factor (intra- and extra-) in education brings back an idea I inquired personally on *any* essential difference between literate culture and oral culture; the results I got were both consoling and disturbing. I am referring to Havelock's (1963) take on the shift in consciousness that accompany literacy. I shall use some of these insights to interpret an episode of the sitcom *Bob Hearts Abishola*, aired primarily in the United States, and watched by more than 100 million subscribers. On one occasion they referred to Akwa Ibom State University (the school that has informed my fourth critical incident, which focuses on my psychic battle while teaching in an American classroom).

Overall, this chapter examines my experience in educational settings in the United States and in contrast to my Nigerian experience. The critical incidents would show what shift in consciousness I envisage or have undergone by inhabiting an in-between space. “What transformative effect can my American educational experience bring to Africa?” is a central question of this chapter. I shall start with what I call my identity profile at the in-between (being African in American class), and then follow with some ideas on my amended alienated voice in a multicultural setting, including the cultural capital of British-American English. I shall also eulogise the salvific effect of autoethnography as a means of decolonisation–transformation. These will lead to the critical incidents that form the core of this chapter, and my elaborate personal reflections thereafter.

I also want to throw in the idea that being from a culture heavily populated equally by what Mayer (2002) tags “industrial and pre-industrial mindsets,” autoethnography branches me out to embody the experience of those from my communities of birth who have no privilege of being overseas as I am. This interpersonal use of autoethnography (fourth critical incident) then becomes a string for me to pull out many Africans from their dark academic environment.
It can inspire them to tell their own stories and to rebuild their world beyond mainstream politics or academia that have disappointed us all.

**My identity battle at the in-between: is my consciousness shifting?**

Havelock (1963) states that writing restructures consciousness. Though he does not say if the restructured consciousness is in the realms of the individual, the collective, or the global mind, I tend to interpret his statement as referring primarily to the Western world. As a typical Western pattern of writing, Havelock sees the oral phase as merely ephemeral and transitory, belonging now to the past; however, I argue otherwise. In the context of the development of writing, and the invention of alphabets, Havelock makes a strong point about the number of centuries (about four) that passed between the invention of the (Greek) alphabet and being considered a literate culture. I tend to see this idea as ominous for collectivist cultures that did not invent their own alphabets. In other words, it could double that amount of time for Black Africa to be considered literate, notwithstanding the number of schools to be found there. I was concerned about the huge gap between America and Africa regarding the role of education, and that had occupied my mind since my Master's program. During my PhD, I asked the question in a Sociogenesis class, and my professor gave me many ideas and links that lie outside the scope of this chapter.

These ideas open a critical platform for an exploration of the nature of transformation that comes from the transition from the oral to the literate mindset. While being in either state is neither right nor wrong (my grandmother and mother were not college-educated but they trained me in college), I tend to read Havelock alongside the ancient story of my culture where a mythological lifestyle reigned like twins being sacrificed to gods and goddesses, and people were sold as slaves (Mayer, 2002; Akpan, 2021). At this time life could be considered “brutish, nasty, and short” (Thomas Hobbes). Let’s say these atrocities happened in our oral phase before colonisation brought its literate culture. In today’s African colleges, Nigeria being a case in point, professors sleep with female students for grades and the young are not mentored as potentials for the societal development, except in those cases where the young is connected to a politician or has money. Are these any different from the ancient mindset just mentioned?

My internal (intra-psychic) world has been plagued by these ideas. (I use the word intra-psychic here to portray what is shakeable, shapeable, and shiftable in the internal human world, with such a shift being observable in virtuous acts, knowledge of the bigger picture, and liberated/critical thinking – the tilt that accompanies true learning.) The extra-psychic world is the societal world, different from either the individual (the A factor) or the social (the B factor) spheres; it is the “C” factor as discussed by Roth (2018) – the societal. This is the factor that is largely missing in the way institutions function in Africa (Akpan, 2020). In other words, much of Africa can only be transformed when something shifts in our intra-psychic world, and that can include a broader form of awareness (by every individual) that no one else will build our world better than we ourselves can.

As a collectivist society, much of Black Africans have not been formally guided to distinguish between individual and societal values, and that is why some professors treat the societal sphere as if it were their individual world. And that drastically affects the quality and standard of education projected and transmitted. For instance, some professors insist student buy their texts even though the said publication has not been subjected to a standard review. Failure of students to do the professor’s will can lead to negative consequences including failing the course. In my personal story, I feel that something has shifted in me since I came to America, but the seed of that shift could have been present while in Nigeria, manifested in the need to
coach my young Africans. The positive changes I have experienced as an individual give me some insight and prompt a deeper understanding of the missing connections among the little societal pieces that are responsible for substandard education in Nigeria. All I have to do is put the insights to work for possible good results. My consciousness started shifting towards intuitive ideas while I was undertaking my Master’s program at St. John’s University, New York. I read texts that challenged my cultural backgrounds while opening me up to a critical assessment of White Western ideologies that were right there in the pages of the open book I was holding.

In all honesty, I only started paying attention to the very word ‘critical’ during that program. It is a word I heard repeatedly in Nigeria during my philosophy undergraduate, but I had no clue what it meant, and I still question whether that word applies to Africa, with its overwhelming patriarchal, colonial, and conformist outlook. In Aune’s (2010) elaboration of the word, “independent reason” is a key expression, and it was an ‘aha!’ moment for me to pay attention to critical thinking.

As I alluded, when I was home, I taught English and Religion, and I still remember teaching young high school students about American and British English expressions, that is, replicating the manner in which I had been taught. After I started taking classes in America, I revolted retroactively against that textbook and my teaching! If I were to teach that again, I would add Nigerian English. But it tears me apart when I hear any Nigerian; most of the age bracket before me say: “We speak British English in Nigeria.” I believe a lack of transformation of consciousness makes Africans hold on to inherited colonial structures in unconscious ways. I hope that my experience will challenge that. This idea means that I now consider again what cultural capitals (O’Connor, 1989; Luna, 1993) I inhabit in my education spaces.

Being located at the in-between of two extremely different cultures has been both tough and sweet. I have been so blessed to be educated in what is a first world – that is the sweet part; the uncomfortable part is that all along I had been educated in Nigeria, both to be connected to a first world and to be alienated from my cultural roots. With the transformation of consciousness that I have experienced, I believe I can do something about the inherent alienation in Black African education. Meanwhile, I prefer “Black Africa” or “African Black” to “sub-Saharan Africa”; the prefix, ‘sub-’ implies inferiority, just as the names “Nigeria” and “Niger” (created by colonisers) echo other contentious ‘N’ words.

**My voice versus the cultural capital and politics of control in my education**

Cultural capital means I pledge allegiance forever and unconsciously to my colonial master whose English and worldview dominate my educated voice: “Voice is the basic unit of a politics of discourse and the process of expressing oneself in a meaningful way by applying the rules of social discourse” (O’Connor, 1989). For me, “the rules of social discourse” mean the grammar which I learned in Nigeria, and the politics which I have grappled with in the American classroom. For O’Connor, dominant discourses control the process of cultural transmission, which is one reason I feel alienated from Africa after my years of education. Furthermore, according to him, it is not sufficient to merely include teaching and learning materials from the minority culture; the larger politics (of control) should be taken into consideration as well. I couldn’t agree more.

In fact, during one of our class discussions (the same class from which I learned the idea of voice control politics), an intercultural study was presented wherein researchers examined how infants are raised in Europe (Germany) and in rural Africa (Cameroon), respectively. The German mother chose her living room for the study while the Cameroonian mother sat
This is sweet but uncomfortable outside. Then the professor asked a question on who among the two mothers was ‘performing,’ as in, acting. My White colleague was quick to answer: the Cameroonian. He couldn’t be more wrong! Rural Africa knows little about acting, and that is why the Cameroonian mother sat outside, for that is the culture – a collective raising of children. That was my voice, and though the only Black person in that class at the time, I think everyone learned something from me that day. But that experience showed me the limits of the politics guiding education, and that I can develop my voice despite the cultural capital of colonial English, much as I overcame my initial obstacle in America.

Luna (1993) has asked a question on the place of personal narrative in a multicultural setting, pondering whether or not personal stories can transform society. Why not? Of course, her answer is in the affirmative. She avers that there is always the imaginative dimension to storytelling built upon the sense of connection (or disconnection?) which the education system enhances. That makes me think of the point where my story gets lost in the academic environment. Yes, I agree the academic world ‘exposes’ me to new ideas but, as both O’Connor and Luna show, I am inherently in a power realm so long as I am in the academia, and I can be torn between my narrative and the expository dimensions of my education. How much do I need to know about the Western form of reasoning? I query after coming this far in my education. There is a tension that I would always experience in the school environment for various reasons (see Luna, 1993). But then Luna says learning to listen is the key to the kind of transformation we need when we bring our personal narratives into the class. In other words, we can always imagine a different story if we listen carefully to each other.

I can’t get over a comment made by another White colleague when I shared that my grandmother cannot tell the clock (but knows time) or count in English, and that she counts “market days” (8 in number) rather than “days of the week” (7 in number), implying there is a tension between the calendar system brought by colonial education and my cultural calendar. My colleague’s response was: “James, it’s amazing that colonisation did not affect every part of your homeland culture.” That was a response I could never have imagined, and I could never get from a fellow African. Aha! I believe autoethnography provides the foundation for my story to be told in ways that can both transform me as well as provide support for others who don’t have people to listen to their personal narratives.

Autoethnography’s Befriending Gesture

The African story has become lost since known history; we still are, hence, my love of autoethnography, which “emerged in response to concerns about colonialism, the need to recognize social difference and identity politics…” (Adams et al., 2013). The method arose as a response to crisis of representation in storytelling about “the other”; thus, personal experience becomes data. Attached to this idea is the fact that identity politics in its intra-national sense also matters. For example, an American audience can watch Bob Hearts Abishola and think they know Africa. While that is true, I would say the program only showcases the Yoruba culture, which is one of the three dominant ones in Nigeria alongside Igbo and Hausa. In other words, there is still something missing in the program regarding intra-national representation.

So autoethnography’s “epistemology of insiderness” means the bottom-up experience stillbeckons in Africa, irrespective of how well we think we know her. I advocate the bottom-up homework for which autoethnography offers much support. This is because, for a unified Africa to be built after all the woes she has experienced, local minority voices need to be heard and sustained. Global politics has largely compromised this idea. Barely had we got over colonisation then along came the so-called Commonwealth. This phenomenon is an abuse of
Africa. She is not allowed to build her own society, and that is the same politics of colonial dominance that has ruled Africa’s institutions, including education (see Lowe, 2015).

Adams et al. (2013) have highlighted four marks of autoethnography: comment/critique of culture/practice; furthering of research; embracing vulnerability “with purpose” (therapeutic value); creating a symbiotic connection with audiences for a response. It situates the experience of the author, writer, or researcher, in the heart of the story. This method is a literary reversal of (or balance to) the very first form of written works done on Africa. That first form was ethnocentric ethnography (or ethnography beleaguered with ethnocentrism), wherein the Western standards were superimposed on African. Now is the time for Africa to tell their own story, as I am doing. I have the impression that this method is good for those who have the good of their culture at heart, the so-called “socially unattached intelligentsia” (Alfred Weber). In addition, this method can help revisit the epistemological foundations of places like Africa that are yet to own their stories. In ethnography, meaning is structured by culture (Miller, Hengst & Wang, 2004); autoethnography inserts the individual within the paradigm of cultural meaning. This understanding has informed my ideas in this chapter.

Theoretical framework: uncomfortable sweetness

The essence of ‘uncomfortable sweetness’ is to gain knowledge but to feel awkward in that process. I see in other people’s autoethnographic stories something that both connects and disconnects with mine. In chapter 1 of their work (rightly entitled, “Your Inquiry is not Like Mine”), Hancock shares his childhood story of being the only black boy in a summer camp: “… and I embodied all the misguided ideals of Blackness as perceived by young White boys” (Hancock et al., 2015, p. 12). Trying to fit in was always the instinct, but doing that for Hancock was to take up an artificial lifestyle, the same thing “which the other boys [White] knew innately.” This innateness blew my mind yet confirmed my ideas about how distraught an African can be when immersed in Western forms, including education. Alienation pops up in Hancock’s story as well as mine. Such an experience came up during his doctorate dissertation and in one of his meetings with his White supervisor. The meeting took place in a coffee shop dominated by White people, and he felt awkward at being the only Black person in the room. I hear you, Hancock!

Feelings of embarrassment also appeared in Hancock’s story as well as mine. For when a topic is discussed and you are unable to contribute or to connect, an awkward feeling overwhelms you. But I see that my age mattered a lot and my background. I came to America as an adult and my story is slightly different from the African American’s story – same alienation in education but different entry points. I have a background in philosophy, which makes me able to connect with virtually every part of the Western world. That also puts me at an advantage globally, though I still struggle as a Black person. I must say that many Nigerians can excel in the Western world because of the hardworking spirit they have acquired while at home, but not necessarily because of the standard of their education. Also, the ability to resist alienation and embarrassment that accrue from being educated abroad comes with age.

As a part of my PhD, I teach a class on introduction to psychology. In that process, I have encountered a few Nigerian young people. I can only imagine how they struggle to fit in, including shortening or mispronouncing their names. Teenage experience of color hasn’t been my lot, but alienation. Ignorance, naivete, and fear are factors Hancock highlights as coloring “patrons,” as in White folks in his domain of experience. Hancock, like me, searches for research works that do not marginalise participants, and autoethnography supplies that missing link. It refines my uncomfortable sweetness.
Method/organisation

I shall discuss the idea of uncomfortable sweetness as I have experienced it in American institutions under “critical incidents.” A critical incident is defined as any situation faced by a person (or community) that causes them to experience unusually strong emotional and/or physical reactions. These reactions may have the potential to interfere with the person’s abilities to function either at the scene, in family life, or even later in life (Fay, 2013). In the case of my experience, the emotion of uncomfortable sweetness is evoked as I feel the contrast between where I grew up and where I am right now. That emotion is very important as it can help me contribute to Africa’s educational growth.

Critical incident 1: finding my way around a first world with a heavy tuition debt

My first critical incident relates to how I navigated a cruel educational process in the United States just six months after my arrival. I signed up for classes because I knew I was ready to study and that I would spend more than the required months to qualify for in-state tuition. That didn’t work. I got the disqualification notice when I was already two weeks into the semester. Then, I was mandated to pay. The 10 credit courses I was taking was going to cost me close to five figures! Converting those figures into my local Nigerian currency would mean an amount in millions! How do I explain that to my mother? How do I even reconcile such cognitive dissonance of paying an amount in four digits for half- or quarter-tuition in one country, and the same amount is in millions (seven digits) in another country? Who am I? Where am I? What is the meaning of all this? These questions went round and round in my mind. I had never experienced anything like that. What was I to do?

Critical incident 2: sitting in a traumatised environment for children’s graduation

In the summer of 2021, when I visited Nigeria for a brief vacation, I got an impromptu invitation to the graduation party in an elementary school, the nearest one to the home I grew up. I was surprised that such a dilapidated building was still in use for education. It was one of the first concrete buildings, a church, built in the area by Irish missionaries. It became converted to a school in the early 1990s, when a new church building was erected. I sat in, facing those brilliant faces of children performing to the delight of parents and teachers. And then I turned briefly to view the roof and the walls of the building; tears rolled down my cheeks “this is an education environment that is traumatic at best,” I whispered to myself. I spent only about three weeks in Nigeria before returning to the USA for the fall semester. But within that short span, I paid a brief visit to the high school I had taught shortly before I got a visa to come to the United States. The state of the buildings in the school vicinity was no different from the elementary school where I had witnessed the graduation party.

Critical incident 3: these uncomfortable texts about Black Africa

I have tried to maintain a catalogue of the great works I have read in American universities and colleges as well as trying to imagine how I would teach these ideas in an African setting. I want to share just three of the troubling texts I have read when I took some undergraduate
classes in psychology: the first relates to the evolutionary history of schizophrenia, and the second is on the idea of intelligence and races (with the third from one of my personal readings).

a. Two separate theories related to the evolutionary existence of schizophrenia were proposed by Tim Crow... and Jonathan Burns... Since similar rates are seen in both industrialized and agrarian societies, this suggests that schizophrenia has existed as a part of the human experience since at least the time humans left Africa some 100,000 years ago. (Ray, 2015)

b. In another controversy, a debate has raged since the 1930s over whether IQ differences between ethnic groups are genetically based ... Arthur Jensen ... has argued for 35 years that environment and socioeconomic differences are inadequate to account for the observed IQ differences among groups. He and Philippe Rushton cite studies indicating that IQ differences are consistent around the world, with East Asians averaging 106 points, whether in the United States or in Asia, Whites about 100, and African Americans at 85 and sub-Saharan Africans around 70 ... (Garrett, 2015)

c. The commerce of Africa, like the intelligence of its people, is yet in a condition little better than that of helpless infancy. I do not entertain as great hope respecting the hereafter of this country, from its ivory, gold dust, or copper ore, as from the industrial products of its cotton, shea-butter, and palm oil. To some it may appear a flight of imagination to regard the slave population as the future workers in developing these resources for their own and their country's good, as well as for the promotion of the commercial interests of the British nation. Nevertheless, ever since I became acquainted with the negro character I have entertained this opinion; and it is strengthened by a daily increasing knowledge of the tribes who trade up the rivers within my consular. 

(p. vi)

**Critical incident 4: my psychic battle in American classrooms**

She sent me a WhatsApp message after one of my classes and told me what I thought would never happen to her. She said,

Professor N says I should pay 10,000 (a Nigerian currency equivalent to $20) or come to his house in Uyo (Akwa Ibom State capital) and sleep with him. He said I failed his class which is practical agriculture (where students are punished in a farm because they want a degree). I told him that I was always present, and he said I am asking too many questions. Everyone in this university knows him as one who does this against female students.

**Analysing my uncomfortable sweet experience in America**

Studying in the United States, for me, is synonymous with not teaching the texts in critical incident 3 but to expose young Africans to its battered history. The first critical incident is not mainly because of tuition; it is rather the significance of social construction in education. Students (citizens and international alike) have had to pay through the nose. I myself have been so lucky to not go through that route, thanks to generous friends and program organisers. But I got captivated on how the societal, the American capitalistic world, has impacted its
institutions. Why can’t my African mythic stories of love and care root out colonisation and alienation in my homeland educational system? I query.

With that being said, I must confess that I had nightmares during my first critical incident. As I was negotiating with the student account office, I realised that I was still going to pay four figures at a reduced rate, maybe a quarter of the total amount. This was not still right for me; I thought I was not justly treated. I kept saying to myself:

I came into this country the right way, and I want to do the right thing, but see what I am going through? This kind of experience is very important though one does not see it on the media. The media often focus on immigrants who come into America the wrong way.

All this went on in my head. Then, luckily, I was at last left off the hook. Thank God. But how did that happen?

Well, I appealed to the president’s office of the school as my last hope. It worked, though there was an initial reluctance. The legal expert of that office that I had first contacted said something like: “This is the president’s office, and we don’t handle students’ financial issues…” My response was something like: “Excuse me, isn’t this the highest office in the school?” “You’re right,” she answered. “I am appealing to you for help,” I continued. By then I did not know that ‘helping’ is a paying profession in America. Anyway, the president’s office helped me out, and their simple explanation was: “Our record shows that you dropped the courses immediately after the bill was sent to you.” This was a survival tactic that just came to me intuitively at the time and has made me respect every Black immigrant to America.

The psychic impact of alienation in education: my different positionings

I have assumed different positions in educational settings. Sometimes I embody the general experience such as shared by Hancock and drawing from Richard Wright’s story, *Black Boy* (Hancock et al., 2015). Other times I disconnect from the general nature of privileged voices in education as a Whiteman’s story – my spectatorship – and still other times I represent my mother’s voice. Being a spectator in education means I have a different world that I can impact, however minimally. My intercultural issue is that if I disconnect with the White voice in the class in America, should that be the case if I were in my country of birth? I once narrated my woes to an American brother-priest who holds a PhD in philosophy. I asked him: “How would you feel if you were a Nigerian in Nigeria, and in an undergraduate program in philosophy with a list of say 50 courses and just one tiny class named ‘African Philosophy’?”

My coming to America has sharpened my eyesight regarding alienation through colonisation in education. It has become a great cause for compassion for my homeland and the wider Black world. America has made me think more deeply, love more freely, and listen more attentively. I have learned to distinguish my story from the Whiteman’s, something that every African educator should learn too (see Fanon, 1967).

My transformed dialogue

*With Bob Hearts Abishola*

The sitcom, *Bob Hearts Abishola*, season 2, episode 6, mentions Akwa Ibom State University, and how a certain professor was sleeping with female students with no consequences (Warner
Bros Entertainment, 2021). This sent chills all over my body, and then a year after that came my fourth critical incident. What worries me is how everyone is silent about it – and that has been a predominant approach to societal vices in Africa’s conformist world. I know that transformation takes time, just like every other good thing in life, but one has to be moving in the right direction. For me, the education system that does not confront issues like professors having sex with students is not a good one. This awful experience is intolerable. It suggests that nothing has shifted in our African societal consciousness.

**Embodying my mother’s and my mentees’ traumatic stories**

The student who shared her story (fourth critical incident) with me has been one of my mentees since I left Nigeria. I realised that my seminary education and gender have both privileged me in ways that are unavailable to women. As she shared her distress, I could feel the sob in her written voice. As traumatic as that was, I carry this message in my heart every time I enter the American class to teach the Introduction to Psychology class to young people whose counterparts are abused and/or miseducated in my homeland. Our general African population has not been educated to own their story yet and to confront powerful, but ill-bred people like corrupt professors in educational settings. “What if this was your child being abused in schools?” is an autoethnographic question I want to bring closer to each African family to bring about radical action.

**Bi- and tri-polarly educated**

Being educated in America with all the resources at my disposal, in contrast to being educated in Nigeria with little to no preparatory materials, feels somewhat like a bipolar episode. The American experience further introduces a tripolar experience to my world. I was versed in the colonised system of education, where what you are being taught has nothing to do with your reality; that I can share with Hancock. But in America, I have come to know more about the African American story, something that is surprisingly unfamiliar in wider Africa. Now I am basically tripolar: exposed to Western White education, the African American experience, and the African. It makes me want to yell out during any episode of racism: “It’s not about black and white but about black and white and black (me).”

**Conclusion**

The societal life of Africa has changed little from ancient times (Mayer, 2002) and I attribute that to the intra-psychic trauma acquired in the course of our evolutionary history. Aderinto (2018) shares a story of what Nigerian schoolchildren went through during colonisation. The colonial representative would stand annually at a stadium in Lagos, Nigeria, on the newly created 20th-century Empire Day. And Nigerian schoolchildren and officials would salute the colonialist. Psychologically, the system was made to function and depend on the coloniser. After Independence, Nigerian nationalists became the ones to be saluted, and Empire Day became “Children’s Day”, in a celebration which remains in place to the present day. This shows the displacement effect rather than decolonisation. The worst? Nigeria is still run by people who were teenagers during colonisation and traumatised to empathise with the coloniser. My advocacy for transformation of consciousness can be realised partly when such a traumatic experience by our present-day leaders experienced as children are treated seriously and on a large scale. But this has not happened yet.
Africa is still both patriarchal and colonial, and any young person who challenges the system is punished. My education abroad positions me to fight for a better system. As I support my mentee (and every good African) to speak up, I see in autoethnography some salvific values for the betterment of Africa – to convert my sweet discomfort into growth and development in the land of my birth. Isn’t this what authentic education ought to be – a shift in consciousness?

References


