

### **Staying West African in New York City**

*“When a West African vendor dons a hat ... emblazoned with the slogan ‘Another Black Man Making Money’ while greeting his customers as ‘brother’ on the streets of Harlem ... not only does he echo and refract an ironic African American response to the racism of white America, he also ... questions the parameters of Blackness that defines the Man, making his own difference as potentially Another Young Black Man.”*

*-- Rosemary Coombe and Paul Stoller in X Marks the Spot...*

This paper addresses the articulation of a specific black self among West African immigrant teenagers. 'Blackness' is often understood as a monolithic racial / ethnic category that is experienced in the same way by all people who are sufficiently dark skinned. In *Small Acts*, Paul Gilroy problematizes such a category when he says that black people may, "co-exist within the same physical environment but they live non-synchronously. [Rather, they are encountered] as a hierarchy in which profoundly antagonistic relations may exist between dominant and subordinate groups" (1993: 99). Further, such essentializing and monolithizing of a category, says Stuart Hall, "[eludes] the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms [created by] the diaspora aesthetic." (Morley and Chen, 1996: 472) With respect to black Americans, Cornel West notes that selective appropriation and re-articulation led to innovations in bodily signals such as language, style and manner (Morley and Chen, 1996:471). Influenced by these theories, my

research attempts to articulate a non-monolithic, dialogic and non-reified understanding of blackness as it exists among West African teenage immigrants living in a racialized New York City.

I focus on the changes in self-identity that West African teenage immigrants perceive within themselves since coming to New York. By identity I mean Manuel Castells' articulation: "Identity as it refers to social actors is the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes, that is/are given priority over other sources of meaning" (1997:6). That is, an identity is articulated when particular symbols with common social meaning are given importance over others. Students who are new to a cultural setting create transformations upon their identities. In order to allow for a continuous transition, their identities must be multiple, constituted both by their original identity and by new expectations and perceptions laid upon them by their new environment. Yali Zou and Enrique Trueba pose this as the disjunction between the enduring self and situated self (1998:22); Margaret Gibson theorizes this phenomenon further and understands the situated self to replace the enduring self (1997:435). While it explicitly avoids the irreconcilable binary imposed by Gibson, my research analyzes the type of disjunction and context in which it occurs in the identities of West African teenagers in New York.

It is pertinent to note that that this study is located in a school. According to Bradley Levinson, Douglas Foley and Dorothy Holland schools are sites where symbolic and social definitions of identity occur (1996:22). Philip Wexler and Lois Weis show how social identities are bound up with social movements and political economic restructuring of local areas. Further, they show how social identities within schools are

also reflections of and simultaneously constitute movements, structures and discourses beyond the school (as stated by Wendy Luttrell in Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996: 93-116). Thus, schools and educational systems are sites of intense cultural politics (Levinson, Foley and Holland 1996: 22).

This research is based at an after-school tutoring program run at a school I will call Patshala High School, in New York City, where I conducted fieldwork from February 2003 to May 2003. I tutored at the program three times a week, and at those times was able to interact with the students and be a participant-observer. This gave me the opportunity to analyze social networks that the students created among themselves. I was also able to be a participant-observer while riding the bus and taking the subway with some students, and on school field-trips. My third method of research was to conduct interviews. This I did with nine students, five of whom were male and the rest female. Thus my main methods of research were participant-observation, social network analysis, and interviews.

Patshala is a public high school that was started two years ago in order to help immigrant and refugee high school students transition into the United States' educational system. Since many of these students do not know English or have not had previous formal schooling, the Patshala curriculum focuses on strengthening English language and basic Math and Science skills. Aware of the vast cultural differences that exist among its students, Patshala constantly encourages both formal and informal dialogue about these differences, for example, through art projects or cultural programs that showcase dances

and storytelling. Currently, Patshala offers only the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades and has a hundred and fifty students enrolled. The ages of these students range from thirteen to nineteen, with one twenty-one year old. Most students have immigrated into the United States within the past two years. They are predominantly from Latin America, the Caribbean, and West Africa; a few are from Bangladesh and Serbo-Croatia. The school environment is an explicitly racialized space: West African students consciously distinguish themselves as black in opposition to what they term as the “Spanish” students. These two groups do not interact much with one another. Further, the lighter skinned Serbo-Croatians are seen to be part of the Latin American/Caribbean group, while the darker skinned Bangladeshis are accepted in the West African cliques. There is hardly any interaction between these two groups; they only communicate with each other when told to do so. This self-segregation was starkly evident on a school trip to the Zoo at which I was present. The students were told to write down which animal each wanted most to see and then were grouped by the teachers according to that animal. In every instance where there was a majority of one ethnicity (either Latino or West African), the other would surreptitiously join another group which had a majority of their *own* ethnicity, irrespective of the animal that they wanted most to see. In this way, the students form distinctive, private communities, within a shared school space, forming an overarching social structure representative of the racialized outside world, within whose boundaries they can interact.

Although non-Americans dominate within the environment of Patshala High, the school is physically located in a space that is dominated by black Americans and Latinos. It is located near a part of New York that is central, commercial, constantly busy and has

a high concentration of blacks and Latinos. Most Patshala students commute through this area everyday. Further, the school shares its building with three other public high schools, all of which are attended mostly by black Americans and Latinos. Thus, students of Patshala regularly observe and interact with Latinos and black Americans.

My research has led me to focus on the conscious and selective appropriation of black American styles of speech and dress as social symbols that allow these West Africans a means to articulate a black self-identity in New York. Yet, simultaneously, they explicitly articulate, in terms of what they call “behavior”, a sense of being *constitutively* different from black Americans. The rest of my paper will address each of these issues – appropriation of speech and dress style, and dis-appropriation of “behavior”.

Speech is seen as a tool through which to engage in social relations. There is the awareness that different kinds of speech are used in different social situations and for different purposes. My research leads me to believe that these West African teenagers consciously appropriate the speaking style of black Americans in order to articulate a black identity within New York. I will focus on one particular, extremely articulate student I call Onami, since most other students I talked to strongly echoed her.

In reference to a general question about how she had changed after she came to New York, Onami immediately launched into a discussion about language and dwelt on it for a long time, indicating that it was an important aspect of herself in her new environment. She described her conscious choice to speak black-American English: "My language has changed, I don't speak in British accent no more. *How I'm speaking to*

*you now, I practice it.* I look at people how they speak and I try to speak like that. No one teaches me, I look at them and learn. They laugh but I don't care. I don't want to speak in my British accent no more" [emphasis mine.] Pursuing this theme, I asked her why she chose this particular style, rather than for example, that of newsreaders or George Bush. She said: "Because I have some black American friends who speak like this and also some African friends [who speak the same way]. Because when you speak your British accent, people look like you crazy. People say, "What is that accent?! Get out of here! You want to be my friend you can't talk like that, uh-uh, you talk like this." Continuing, she recalled that once, early in her American life, she had been standing at a bus stop with some black American age-mates she knew slightly. When she started to talk, they began making fun of her, teasing her about her accent and the words she used. Rather than being insulted, Onami accepted and even embraced this as a social reprimand. "They not being bad," she said, "they helping you when they say this. They want you to have friends, they want to be friends with you." Onami distinguishes this style of speech from a more formal one. She volunteered: "My parents tell me I can't write like that [the way she now talks]. There is a difference how you write and how you speak. I know. I know its wrong to write like this." (Interview, March 22, 2003)

Another student, Mistri, explicitly locates this style as useable in informal social circumstances: "Course I won't speak like this to my teachers!" he says. (Interview, April 1, 2003)

I notice that clothing style is similarly used to articulate a sense of belonging to a wider, black community. All the girls that I talked to say that they dress very differently

in New York than before they came here, and that they are happy to be dressing this way. They address these differences in terms of the tightness and shortness of clothes. When asked to describe stylish clothes, "sexy" was a word that they often used. Clothes, then, are articulated as a collective visual symbol, rather than as signifiers of personal meaning such as "individuality" or "comfort".

Boys vary when asked about how they dress in New York – some say they dress the same way as before and don't want to change, others prefer the baggy pants, basketball jerseys and doo rags they started to wear here. The latter are extremely brand conscious - Rocawear, Pepe, Nike and clothing sold by the NBA are some of the brands they patronize. Again, this shows the importance of clothing as a *collective* symbol. Most girls poke fun at these boys; Rita laughed, "I don't like their big big clothes because they can't keep them on!" (Interview, March 25, 2003) Yet it is these very boys that have the most social currency: these are the boys that get favorable attention from the girls and these are the ones who claim to have black American friends. When I asked one of these boys, Surya, why he dressed differently in New York, he said: "Because this is what many people here wear." (Interview, April 14, 2003) Clothing, then, becomes a visual mode through which to articulate a sense of belonging.

It is important to note that this selective appropriation of speech and dress style exists both as a conscious tool of manipulation, and simultaneously as one that exists for its own sake. With regard to the mechanical reproduction of art, Walter Benjamin said: "[a] reproduction ... reactivates the object reproduced" (1968:221); similarly, the visual and aural reproductions by these West African teenagers create a symbolic reference of

belonging. Onami illustrates this when she says that she talks in a particular manner because she has friends who talk that way or because she does not want to be made fun of; she distinguishes it from what she terms as 'correct' English, which is appropriate for formal instances, such as writing. Surya also makes this explicit when he says that he dresses a particular way because others around him do so. However, what they appropriate is expressed in terms of pleasure and excitement; this indicates that their selective appropriation is an enjoyable phenomenon that also exists for its own sake.

Although I did not have enough time during my research to focus on gender relations, differences, and constructions among these West African teenagers, I find it necessary to mention, at least as an aside, those minor observations that I was able to make. First, it is clear from their articulation on clothing I have presented above that female and male styles are viewed as collective symbols in different ways. Women's clothes are sexualized, as indicated by the words used to describe them – “tight”, “short”, “sexy”. In fact, when I asked Umeed during an interview to describe women's clothes that he thought were stylish, he launched into an extremely explicit sexualized description: “I like my girl to be wearing a *tight* shirt (moves his hands across his chest) ...” (March 31, 2003). Men's clothes, on the other hand, are commercialized; in their case, brand names gain importance. Second, with reference to the network analysis, I observed that the West African students segregate themselves by sex. Although they do not divide themselves spatially in a classroom, there is a definite, yet permeable, social boundary. Girls and boys do not chat or ‘hang out’ with each other in the same way that they do among their own sexes. Rather, the extent of their interactions consists of

teasing, yelling at, and flirting with each other. Sometimes, though rarely, they work together. Boys, rather than girls, tend to form insular groups and cliques among themselves. Most girls are willing to have individual, casual friendships with other girls, while boys are more selective in their interactions outside their specific groups. Identity, then, is demonstrated in different ways among the sexes: through group belonging in the case of boys, and in individualized and sexualized terms among the girls. Once again, these are simply my observations and I have not had time to pursue them in my interviews; hence I feel inadequately equipped to theorize much upon them.

The next section deals with how these black West African teenagers dis-engage from the very references to black Americans that they consciously produce in themselves. This articulation takes a verbal form, expressed in the context of what they call “black American behavior”. Verbalized using vague, totalizing terms, these distinctions are many times not meaningful. In their attempt to distinguish themselves from black Americans, the West Africans create polarized and essentialized differences. They say there are not black Americans because “black Americans are always rude; they destroy things for no reason; they are not respectful to their parents; they laugh if you are different.” Implicit in this critique is that as West Africans *they* never do such things. One student says she is not black American because she is not perfect in their language; in response to my question about whether she might one day become black American if she perfects their language, she responds that she still “cannot” because she does not “have their behavior.” (Interview, March 22, 2003) Her use of the phrases “cannot” and “have behavior” indicates that this “behavior” is understood as a reified and constitutive

characteristic, an unbridgeable gap that separates black West Africans from black Americans.

The selective appropriation and differentiation, that is both conscious and dialogic, allows these West African teenage immigrants in the Bronx to manipulate and enjoy difference within the monolithic understanding of a 'black sameness' that exists in the larger racial framework of New York. They attempt to be viewed as "authentically black", and simultaneously attempt to retain the political and historical implications of being a recent West African immigrant.

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