



THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN CANADA: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY & BELONGING

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IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY: Intergenerational Experiences of African Youth in a Canadian Context

Philomina Okeke-Ihejirika and Denise L. Spitzer

INTRODUCTION

THIS CHAPTER IS BASED on a three-year research project that examines the experiences of African women in Alberta, one of the ten Canadian provinces. Although our research targets African women in general, this chapter focuses specifically on a sample of the youth population within this larger group. In contrast to the United States, the majority of Blacks in Canada have immigrated to this country in the twentieth century. Even in the province of Alberta, where a number of Black communities were established in the nineteenth century, most Blacks are either of Caribbean or continental African descent (Okeke et al. 2000). Economic downturns and political unrest across the African continent have encouraged a continuously rising trend of immigration to North America (Mkandawire 1997).

Research on African immigration often focuses on men's experiences, especially with respect to the brain drain (Das 1974; McDonald and Crush 2002; Pascal 2003). Women's experiences of migration

have often been regarded as ancillary to the movement of men (Boyle and Halfacree 1999). In recent years, however, greater attention has been paid to the unique experiences of female immigrants and refugees (Buijs 1993; Wilson and Frederiksen 1995) who usually bear the responsibility of not only caring for family members, but also reinforcing the boundaries of ethnocultural communities in their new homeland (Spitzer et al. 2003). Research on immigrant women in Canada has tended to focus on the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class in the context of work, health, and citizenship (Elabor-Idemudia 2000; Kinnon 1999; Mulvihill, Mailloux, and Atkin 2001; Stasiulis and Bakan 1997). With some notable exceptions (Elabor-Idemudia 2000; Musisi 1999), however, the experiences of African immigrant women in Canada remain understudied. Our earlier research clearly shows that African women's experiences tend to be homogenized within a "Black pool" of Caribbean and/or older diasporic communities that appeared to bury the peculiarities of African women's experiences (Okeke et al. 2000).

To begin to address this gap in our understandings, our project, entitled *In Search of Identity, Longing for Homelands: African Women in Alberta*, seeks to illuminate the experiences of African women in the context of transnational and flexible identities and allegiances. Preliminary findings from our research thus far suggest that these women have not completely left Africa; they serve as the bridge between African and diasporic communities. The majority of African immigrant women in Alberta followed their husbands to Canada in search of better employment; others found themselves in Canada as refugees who left their homeland unprepared in order to escape war and conflict. Very few of these women made a conscious decision to immigrate, for instance, to pursue tertiary training. Their social backgrounds and the circumstances surrounding their arrival in, and adjustment to, a new homeland have placed two formidable sets of challenges before them: their struggle to establish themselves in a new homeland, and their efforts to nurture social ties with the homeland they left behind, ties they consider crucial to their survival as a people. This chapter poses the question: 'What impact do these challenges African women face have on their children here in Canada?'

Canada is a nation that prides itself on its multicultural heritage. Unlike the United States that is often considered a melting pot, Canada purports to nurture the *Canadian mosaic* – a conglomerate of cultures under one flag (Taylor 1983). Given the transnational aspirations of their parents and the multicultural principles around which their lives are shaped in Canada, the younger generation are caught between two major forces: Canadian immigration policy that targets economically viable professionals that could blend into multicultural Canada with little or no socio-ethnic chaos, and parents who are bent on establishing a new homeland with a proud African identity and strong linkages to the continent.

The imagining of home and homeland is an important anchor, particularly for diasporic peoples (Gupta and Ferguson 1997b; Cohen 1997). As identities become increasingly transnational and deterritorialized, however, the issue of how these concepts are formed demands attention. Furthermore, the presumption that persons can draw upon a *natural* identity grounded in a particular locale must be disrupted by an interrogation of the contested and imagined claims to place and community (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a). Immigrants and refugees engage in multiple identities that allow them to ally with or resist various values and meanings as they emerge in shifting and disparate contexts (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992). This flexibility is also challenged by the demands, especially in a pluralist society, to situate cultural identity around attachments that render others outside these boundaries (Hall 1996). These issues of identity formation are particularly intriguing for women whose responsibility to enculturate children requires them to model what they deem as culturally-appropriate behaviour as a means of shoring up the borders between us – in this instance an *African identity* – and the Other, represented as *Canadian society* (Spitzer et al. 2003; Wilson and Frederikson 1995). We are interested in learning about the ways in which women not only occupy different subject locations at different moments (Ong 1995), but how women choose to present themselves and structure these identities.

This chapter unveils the voices of African youth in the diaspora and their struggles to understand their place as dual citizens of, at minimum, two homelands. The population of immigrant youth in Western countries, including Canada, is increasing, and like other immigrants, how African parents and their children adjust and adapt in order to advance in Canada will also contribute, in no minimal terms, to the reshaping of the Canadian mosaic (Bacon 1999; Mackey 1999; Sims and Omaji 1999). Immigration is, in a sense, a new beginning that entails a reconstructing of cultural practice, notions of self, and attachment to the larger society, the success of which is greatly predicated on the immigrant's sense of the personal and social resources at his/her disposal (Espiritus 1992; Sayad 2000; Suarez-Orozco 2001). Global migration is creating individuals and communities whose social locations now raise serious questions about the taken-for-granted notion of citizenship. This notion, which tended to anchor individual's rights and freedoms in relation to specific nation-states, is now seriously contested, because "migration requires individuals and groups to develop multiple loyalties and identities ... [and] calls into question the idea of citizenship as having a unique focus of loyalty to a particular nation-state" (Osler and Starkey 2003, 243). How immigrant African youth confront the process of building Canadian citizenship (given the peculiarities of their social origin, the barriers they face, and their coping strategies) calls for further investigation and debate. As Anderson (1991) points out, any multicultural society embodies sites of citizenship where its members are socialized into "imagined communities." How well youth of different origins

understand, and are represented by, models of citizenship would significantly mediate the process, as well as the results. Regardless of the reasons that brought them into a new environment, immigrants carry their experiences, values, and predictable patterns and contexts into the struggle to make a *home away from home*. We loosely employ the notion of citizenship in this paper, intending to highlight, rather than blur, its inter-connectedness with identity as an equally contested ground. In forging identities within a larger society, immigrant youths, we argue, bear the mark of the migration experience (Sayad 2000). Their views embody a characteristic element of migration; a historical experience of domination, in transnational terms, by the mainstream culture that the immigrant lives out in both the symbolic expressions of identity, as well as in the struggle to attain a certain material status. Bearing in mind that the fluidity of social relations African youth experience is embedded, their identities cannot be theorized in terms of

a coherent, monolithic, and enduring construct [but more as a probe into the manner in which the diversity of constructs] are implicated in the ability to transverse increasingly discontinuous social, symbolic, and political spheres. The children of immigrants must construct identities that will, if successful, enable them to thrive in incommensurable social settings such as home, schools, the world of peers, and the world of work (Suarez-Orozco 2001, 137).

We are ultimately concerned with how well these young women are able to juggle or recreate hybrids of African and Canadian cultures that enable them to find a comfortable ground.

In addition to the common challenges a mainstream culture presents to any immigrant community outside the home, parents and children also struggle with family tensions that come with shifts in gender roles and a re-shaping of home, both as an institution and in terms of the status of family members. Hence, parental assertions of the *old ways* could be seen as both mechanisms for sustaining tradition, but also as desperate moves to stabilize the *structured whole* in a new world. We argue, however, that regardless of the tensions associated with resisting the dilution of a *traditional* way of life, emerging diasporas often expect that women recreate the home left behind in their values, choices, and practices (Espin 1999; Morck 2000; Prieur 2002). Thus, these young African women, in their behaviour, see themselves and are seen by others as carriers of traits of a specific culture. What they articulate as their parents' expectations for them imply not only the presumption of a culture away from home competing with an immediately present culture, but also an older and more conservative culture compared to the global model – the *Western culture*. This characteristic dissociation, a common feature of immigrant youth perceptions of self and society, often places the Western culture as

one stripped of these old traits and now professing a modern contrast (Wakil, Siddique, and Wakil 1981).

Focusing on the responses of the African youth we interviewed, we also explore, in a broader sense, the implications of transnational immigration and citizenship for establishing a solid base and identity for new African communities in the diaspora. We focus, in particular, on perceptions of fluid allegiances, imagined homelands, and intergenerational tensions within this group. We must emphasize at the onset that the following analysis does not aim to generalize the experience of African youth in Canada based on the experiences of those sampled. We recognize that even within this purposively qualitative sample, we are dealing with experiences mediated by immigrant origin, gender, age, religion, and so on (Prieur 2002). Africa is a continent of over fifty countries, diversely oriented in social, economic, and political terms. It is safe, therefore, to argue that the experiences of Africa's youth in the diaspora present their own complexities that research has yet to capture. We are also clearly aware that current trends and social relations in the country of immigration impact on, or overlap with, these young women's views, making it difficult to rigidly locate any trait or situation.

METHODOLOGY

This work is guided by principles of feminist research that demand attention to questions of voice and the needs of informants and communities involved in explorations (Reinharz 1992). Feminist scholarship recognizes the fact of women's subordinate status in society and the low priority it has commanded in mainstream, traditional disciplines. The main objective of feminist research is to uncover the specificities of women's oppression as a basis for exploring possible avenues of bringing fundamental improvements to their lives. The appropriate methods of achieving this main objective may be debated, but most feminist researchers would agree that women's voices and viewpoints constitute their primary data base (Shields and Dervin 1993, 66).

Feminist scholarship attempts to identify and analyze the relations of power embedded in women's lives. As Smith (1986) argues, women's everyday experiences tell the stories of their oppression. According to her, it is from the basic aspects of their lives that one can begin to trace the impacts of larger, oppressive social forces. Smith points out that beginning from the experiences of women does not imply a myopic view of social reality, but offers insights into the ways in which female subjects experience social, cultural, and economic contexts (1986, 7-9). In other words, a feminist perspective does not imply a narrow focus on women's lives, but rather, allows the researcher to begin a systematic inquiry into where women are located socially, economically, and politically.

In placing women's experiences within a broad social context, feminist scholarship confronts, not only the relations of gender, but those of class, race, ethnicity, and other social categorizations that define women's conditions of existence. As Morgan (1988, 91) notes, gender "is not something unchanging that is brought into every encounter, but is often shaped and patterned in different interactional contexts." Thus, gender relations "must also be seen holistically and in context, and as socially and culturally complex" (Shields and Dervin 1993, 66). The feminist standpoint certainly finds significant resonance in mainstream approaches, such as critical ethnography and grounded theory, that stress the need to build our knowledge of human experiences from the point of view of those who live these experiences, allowing their voices to guide our explorations (Baker, Wuest, and Stern 1992; Field and Morse 1985; Smith 1986).

The diversity of experiences – personal, political, religious, and linguistic – contained under the rubric of African women also demand the use of diverse methods to triangulate information and provide rich insights into women's lives (Neufeld et al. 2001). To this end, we employed multiple methods: a literature review, focus groups, interviews with community leaders, and a province-wide survey. The primary research team is comprised of the two co-authors and a community partner, the Edmonton Immigrant Services Association. The authors of this article come from different disciplinary backgrounds (economics and anthropology) and possess complementary expertise working with African women within the continent and in Canada. A community advisory committee was established that includes representatives from immigrant service agencies, ethno-cultural associations, and women's organizations. The purpose of the community advisory committee was to provide input into research instruments, identify potential participants, and facilitate the dissemination of results. The work of the committee was particularly important with regards to participant recruitment in members' community networks, as gaining entry into communities where discrimination is a problem can be quite challenging (Arcury and Quandt 1999).

Research assistants affiliated with disparate religions (Moslem and Christian), national origins (Somali/Kenyan, Niger/Nigerian), and community animators from Mauritius, Zimbabwe, and South Africa also assisted with the recruitment and facilitation of focus group discussions. They provided varied points of entry into a wide range of African-Canadian communities, points which are necessary when working with diverse populations (Neufeld et al. 2001). The multiple positions of research team members in terms of origins (Nigeria, Malawi, and the United States), socioeconomic class backgrounds, and religion (Christian and Jewish), provide a diversity of insights and variable insider/outsider statuses vis-à-vis informants (Wolf 1996). It is still important, however, to recognize powerful differentials between researchers and informants

and necessary, as well, to acknowledge the agency of informants to participate in research (Ong 1995).

For the purposes of this chapter, we concentrate on focus group findings. Focus groups or group interviews are not identical to conversations. They resonate, instead, with everyday gatherings of women and are therefore appropriate methods for enlivened and enlightening discussion (Kelly 1978; Reinhartz 1992). Five focus groups were hosted between December 2002 and July 2003 with women from various geographical and linguistic regions, including the Horn of Africa and Central, West, Southern, and Eastern Africa. In addition, a focus group was conducted with young African women to explore their unique experiences maturing in a diasporic community. This chapter focuses on the findings from the latter. Participants ranged in age from eighteen to twenty-five and included young women from Eritrea, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, the Sudan, and Ethiopia. Two informants, Zahra¹ and Rachel, were born in Canada to Eritrean and Ethiopian parents, respectively, who came to Canada as refugees. Rose and Teresa arrived as children of independent immigrants, eight months and ten years old, respectively. The former is from Ghana, the latter from Nigeria. Mary and Surya came to Canada as adolescents. Mary was about thirteen years old when she came from Nigeria with her mother, an independent immigrant. Surya was fifteen years old when she came with her family as a refugee from Sierra Leone. Myriam, from Sudan, is also a refugee and the only member of the study group who came alone to Canada. She was about twenty-four years old when she arrived. We interviewed them about their experiences in Canada and their visions of the future. In order to address the questions raised earlier, this paper examines four major themes from these interviews: family roles, community life, social values and dating, and identity.

Context

In order to situate the experiences of African women in Alberta, we must provide a brief overview of their status and some of the issues that pertain to youth. Nearly 80 percent of foreign-born women are employed full-time; however, they occupy the lowest rungs of the labour market and are often overqualified for their level of employment (Statistics Canada 2000). While 58.5 percent of African immigrants in Alberta have completed post-secondary education, this has not translated into commensurate professional or economic status in Canada (Lamba, Mulder, and Wilkinson 2000). Over 41 percent of African women in Alberta are employed in the service sector, 18.5 percent occupy business, finance, or administrative positions, while more than 9 percent work in processing and manufacturing. An additional 8.3 percent are found in the health sector (Lamba, Mulder, and Wilkinson 2000). Professional gate-keeping and demands for Canadian experience produce significant barriers to the employment of newcomers in their previous fields of endeavour.

Furthermore, women are more likely than men to secure employment upon arrival, regardless of wage status, and may therefore remain in these “survival jobs” while their partners pursue education or more suitable employment opportunities. It is important to note that, while most newcomers to Canada experience a decline in socioeconomic status, visible minority immigrants and refugees are less likely to become upwardly mobile in the subsequent generation than migrants from European source countries (Basavarajappa and Jones 1999; Kazemipur and Halli 2000). This suggests that racism plays a significant role in depressing socioeconomic status. Thus, overt and more subtle forms of racism can undermine personal interactions, and institutionalized forms may constrain access to power (Fleras and Elliott 1999; Jones 2000). These phenomena contribute to experiences of everyday racism and the reasons organizations cite to account for the failure of ethnic minorities to attain the values of the dominant society, thereby discounting the existence and persistence of inequality (Essed 1991).

Despite social and economic disappointments that often result in thwarted ambitions, many immigrant and refugee parents see their children’s education as a means of ensuring upward mobility (Bauder 2001). Indeed, immigrant youth are employed at lower rates than their Canadian-born counterparts, because the former are often more invested in education. For instance, over 28 percent of Canadian-born women between fifteen and eighteen are employed, compared to 14.2 percent of recent young immigrant women and 24.4 percent of women from established immigrant families. Bauder (2001) asserts that education is a crucial means of ascending the socioeconomic hierarchy within immigrant communities. Education, however, is also a major socializing agent that inculcates students with particular sets of values and aspirations that could conflict with parental ideals, potentially contributing to intergenerational tensions.

Intergenerational conflict is often regarded as an artifact of adolescent individuation and is presumed to be particularly charged among immigrant parents and their children. Both the length of residence in Canada and the number of years of schooling in a Western system appear to be related to the desire of immigrant youth to assume the dominant values, desires, and expectations of Euro-Canadian youth (Merali and Violato 2002). Parental expectations of their adolescent children’s behaviour, however, are not uniform and may be related to family size and parental education. Compared to the average, for instance, parents with higher education and fewer children tend to be supportive of their children’s desire to adopt values and behaviours of the dominant Canadian youth culture (Merali and Violato 2002). Other factors are also salient. In a survey of adolescents in Alberta, speaking a language other than English or French at home was associated with attendance at a place of worship and more conservative attitudes towards social and sexual behaviour (Bagley, Bolitho, and Bertrand 2001). Youth in our focus group reflect on the dynamics of these desires and

expectations from family, community, and friends as they make their way into adulthood as young African women in Alberta.

RESULTS

Family Roles

According to these young women, the structure of family roles are somewhat less rigid than what might still be the case back in African countries. They admit that many of the tasks are shared among siblings, but point out that because of their age and primary focus on schooling, at the moment, a good deal of the household work shifted to their mother. Most of them are speaking from a fairly long period of living at home. Even though a good number of these young women are well over eighteen years of age and would therefore officially be considered adults, they all reside with their parents. Mary is from Nigeria and is the oldest in her family. She was well over ten years old when she arrived in Canada with her family “in search of a better life.” As the eldest sibling with a much younger brother, Mary helps her mother to run the house, “making sure things are in order ... [taking] responsib[ility] for different household duties and chores ... making sure things run properly.” She seems to accept these domestic duties as responsibilities she can be depended upon to embrace, having spent her formative years back home. Most of the informants point out, however, that they spend a good deal of time outside the home and so end up merely helping their mothers around the house rather than assuming substantial responsibility for duties. Zahra, the daughter of Eritrean refugees, was born in Canada. When she is at home, she can be counted upon to help out with “like, washing the dishes, or shoveling the snow, or things like that,” but “mostly, I am considered a child and a student.” Rose came as a child to Canada and has little or no memory of life in Ghana. She insists that “there are no really defined rules” in her family. But the rest of the young women believe that the division of tasks at home is gendered.

Those who came to Canada as children or were born in Canada seem to use their parents as the benchmark for assessing whatever they define as the *African* model of familial behaviour and gender roles. Whatever their impressions of the gendered division of domestic work, which they agree exists, their responses clearly show that they feel their parents’ expectations differ from what they perceive to be the *Canadian* model. According to Zahra, “as a girl I would not want to be [stuck in the kitchen] ... but between my parents I feel, though, that there are still some gender roles that they brought back here to Canada from Eritrea ... such as my mom mostly doing the cooking and the cleaning ... and my dad mostly doing the more manly roles around the house.”

Many Canadian families may not consider these descriptions of household distribution of duties among parents and children unusual or unique to immigrants, in particular; however, respondents appear to presume that most Canadian households enact a more equitable domestic division of labour. In their responses, these young women imply a transfer of cultural elements that are not necessarily in tune with the Canadian way of life. As noted earlier, such a stance is very common with immigrant children who perceive the mainstream culture not only as a modern alternative, but the model that the *older* one has yet to catch up with. Rachel was born in Canada to Ethiopian refugees and notes, for instance, “My dad would not ever be seen cleaning the bathroom and doing stuff like that. He cooks sometimes ... but the majority of it, my mom and I will do, like, stuff, and my dad would be more of, like, doing fixing the car, if it’s something wrong in the house than everything else.” Surya agrees and states that “I have my own roles, and my brother has his own roles.” As she further explains, “no, he is not cooking ... Sometimes he is cleaning the parlour and I clean the kitchen, he is not doing anything, because it is our roles, or types.” Interestingly, all of them accept this gendered division – as long as they live at home. With the exception of Surya, who accepts the gender bias as the natural order of things, all of the participants have serious doubts about their maintenance of what they see as *the African way* at home in their own generation as parents. They do not think their parents can transfer these *ways* to this younger generation.

All of the respondents brought a very clear awareness of the different worlds they lived in: life outside and life at home, often with both parents. For Zahra, the situation works well, but only for now. She remarks, “It doesn’t bring any ... er ... much conflict, because my brother does the exact amount of work that I do. But I feel that if I were to get married ... I would not want to be stuck in the role of female, doing all the female things. I would expect my husband to do the same.”

Community Life

Besides their schooling, community life for these young women revolves around their families, the local church, Black students’ groups, the youth wing of Black associations, and country of origin organizations. Most of the young women are involved in Black organizations, in some cases with minimal or no tangible pressure from their families. In contrast, their involvement in ethnic organizations is often grounded in the need to satisfy their parents who are often active in these associations. Only one of the informants was involved with an organization that extended beyond Black/African communities.

The young women ascribe to multiple definitions of, and identifications with, community. Every one of them, including those born in Canada, seem to have some idea that their parents’ own vision of community carried from Africa was different, in many ways, from what obtains in Canada. Thus, when they describe community life, they account for their parents’ allegiances, as

well as their own. In Rose's view, "my community would be Edmonton, because on my day-to-day basis, I don't run into many African or Caribbean or Black people. It is only when I make an active effort to, outside of school."

These young women's definition of community also overlaps, in various degrees, with their sources of social support. Most of the young women obtain support from their parents, friends they grew up with, and religious institutions. To them, life in Canada is more like highly dispersed sets of social groupings, many of which have no communal hold but only interconnect at various points. As Mary remarks, "[It's a] social network. There's no community ..." She further explains that "[t]here's no community, because we don't interact with [many people around us]. We don't go out to the community [around]. So I'm in a community, but I'm not part of that community." Beyond their immediate family surroundings, they see something of a community life in country-of-origin organizations, although most of them are still far from being firmly established and are struggling to mobilize transnationals as a distinct population.² Myriam, the Sudanese refugee who came alone to Canada only a few years ago, also notes that

the Sudanese ... help [newcomers] a lot, first, to understand the life here ... We have women's group ... those women need a lot of help. Whenever they have problems, they turn to the community. So they find what they need from the community, in terms of language and problems with kids at school. A lot of things like that, they cannot go direct. They do not know where to turn. So the first thing, they will go to the community.

The issue of racism came up during our discussions, but individual women related this concept more in terms of what happens in a specific context. Those who grew up in Canada admit to a few hurtful moments in their childhood when they had to confront racism head-on, but they easily shrugged off their experiences of name calling (such as *browntoast*) and racist innuendos from classmates at school. Most feel that they suffered little and that racism directed at them was usually subtle. As Rachel notes, for instance, classmates could engage in name calling, "But from teachers ... [it] is always, like, you don't know ... what they are thinking, and I think they can easily think that you are Black, you do not know the stuff ... sometimes I wonder [if] they are just ... not too sure ... [when] I observe how they treat me [differently from] ... other people in class." Surya feels that her own situation has a lot to do with coming to Canada at an older age. According to her, "When I first got to school, I don't have friends, a lot of friends, because I don't know why, and I'm not allowed to talk in class ..." Myriam could relate to Surya's experience. Unlike Surya, who was fifteen years old when she arrived in Canada with her parents, Myriam was well over twenty, by herself, and struggling with Canadian English. As she explains, "The problem I found was ... with my accent ... Even [when] other

people, they say it ... like the Chinese women in the class ... I know that their pronunciations are not right, but she will say, is OK. And then, when it comes to me ... she will say, Could you repeat it? ... I get so upset in the class.” In response to Myriam’s comments, Rachel explains that racism in Canada is very subtle. There is just no way of knowing whether it is racism or not. In her view, the teachers either do not really understand Myriam, or they are “asking you purposely to, like, make you [look] dumber ...”

It seems, however, that for these young women, racism has not presented an insurmountable obstacle on their path. Their responses suggest some understanding of the challenges they face in a society whose relationship with those outside the mainstream population is mired in ignorance. Even in their perceptions of racism, as well as responses to what they consider racist attacks, there is hardly any impression of frustration that could get in the way of everyday life or goals for the future.

On the whole, these young women’s descriptions of community life, what they know as community, and their experiences of racism suggest an emerging, albeit tentative, pattern. They are taking hold of a new form of community life as Black Canadian youth to which their parents cannot relate. But they also covet that taste of what community life should be in the country-of-origin associations that their parents are struggling to build. Although they fluidly move between these two perceptions, they are clearly aware that, however dispersed they may be, family and friends are their best options for support and therefore comprise their “community” in Canada.

Social Values and Dating

Again, the *double life* these young women live is succinctly portrayed in their perceptions of the values that guide their actions and decisions. Zahra tries to capture the two paths African youth struggle to merge:

Being raised in Canada ... I’ve been surrounded by Canadian values, like going to Canadian schools, even though you’re taught Canadian values, but when you come home, is a different lesson from your parents, who have been raised in Africa and spent all ... most of their life in Africa. So one ... in my home ... I have to live up to the expectations of my parents, and those expectations are mostly things they will expect. They will expect ... things I will expect from them back home in Africa. So some of them are achievable, but some you just don’t want to live up to that because [of] being surrounded by Canadians ... growing-up in Canada. There’s something different outside of your house.

Part of the struggle is to find a definition of the *good girl* agreeable to both parent and daughter. Rose feels that there is a difference between Canadian and

African norms, but admits that she is not exactly sure of what that difference is. As she puts it, "I don't think I have a strong sense of the African good girl since I was ... raised here," but feels that her parents would agree with the idea of "someone who works hard, has values and morals." Zahra said: "Because I spent most of my life in Canada and I've only been back home to Eritrea once ... I am surrounded most of the time by Canadian values." Teresa thinks it "would probably be someone who is responsible and respectful and also has self respect for herself and someone whose goal is really focused, and like she said, like, she is educated also, and loyal, and what else."

Obviously, these young women are aware of the cultural duality they live out on a daily basis and are already making choices. They know their limits at this point and are reserving the freedom to make further choices when they leave home. They tell us, for instance, that their parents have their own expectations for them as good girls. In their view, however, their parents' ideas of a good girl come with values from an older generation, some of which do not have much currency for them. As one of them pointed out, their parents expect obedience and good behaviour, defined as refraining from drinking alcohol and smoking and staying away from boys. The respondents, however, would like to relax the rules a little. These perceptions of good traits do not really indicate a real difference between Canadian and African cultural expectations. The emphasis, it seems, is on the *manner* these traits are expressed in each culture rather than their essential content as social values.

Rachel, who was born in Canada, feels that while her parents may not associate being a good girl with drinking and smoking, she will settle for something a little less stringent. In her view, "Well obviously, she cannot be drinking everyday and getting drunk and stuff. But if she drinks, like, on special occasions, like, you know, when she goes out ... social drinking ... I don't think that's bad at all. Like everybody in the world does that, you know. I know so many people do that, you know." Surya supports this view, insisting that many young African women would avoid the extremes. According to her, "You don't have to be, like, bad girl in school, a bad girl in the street, you don't have to say bad language in your mouth. You have to follow all the rules ... [at home]." Mary picks up the emphasis and asks, "Who is a good girl? ... [T]here are lot of things that I do being a good girl [that] were passed on by my parents ... Like, just being respectful, ... doing well in school, books, ... knowing what is expected of you [at] home and then presenting yourself well in public ... just being a nice person, whatever that means."

There is certainly some confusion about values, which tend to shift between perceptions of African and Canadian features. The definition of a good girl, for example, embeds values, such as obedience, respect, and self-comportment, as well as having a high regard placed on education by both parents and children. These values are not necessarily peculiar to African cultures. The focus on pursuing educational aspirations is evidently shared by most cultures.

These young women consistently emphasize the importance of their training, both to themselves and their parents. Reflecting on her childhood, Mary recalls, "I think for me the main focus was always on school, so as far as dating and relationships go, it was school first. They always made an issue of it." For Rose, "My parents always ... ehm, I think I've motivated myself well; they have wanted me to do well in school, but ... nothing specific – you have to do what you have to do. I think I take that upon myself, for the most part." Teresa also points to her parents' influence on her education. "My family has always focused mainly on education first, and then everything else came ... after it." For Rachel, too, education was the key emphasis. According to her, "My parents always said, 'Do good in school ... and then go ahead and date ...' because they think boys can quickly change your mind about school."

Most of them agree, however, that despite the points of agreement with their parents, their lives remain wedged somewhere between African and Canadian values. Zahra thinks that, for now, her parents will influence her values more than society: "Right now, I will lean more towards the African values, because I am still living with my parents. And they feed me and clothe me, and they provide me with the bed that I sleep in, so I think, if I want to stay there, I have to listen to them. But when I become more independent, I'll probably lean more over to Canadian values." As a parent, Zahra points out, "I'll probably lean more towards Canadian values in raising [my children] ... but I will select and teach them [about] ... where they came [from] and things like that." It is Mary, perhaps, who came to Canada as a teenager, who succinctly articulated the complex duality in which African youth experiences are immersed. As she puts it, "I guess it really depends on what the issue is, because there are Canadian values that are on ... the African side. So I will not say that I have acquired too much ... [or] ... one more than the other. But more so what my mom has instilled in me is not specific to Nigerian. But just being a well-rounded, good person."

Dating, however, is a potential site of intergenerational conflict and remains a topic these focus group participants tend to avoid in discussions with their parents. African parents, they feel, will never understand dating because of their background. These young women, however, opened up and told us about some of the challenges they have with dating. Zahra points out that

[my parents cannot relate to] most of the [ads] that come up in the TV about dating and things like that ... because I think, with my parents, their first relationship was each other. But being in Canada and kids are dating younger. I haven't been involved in any relationships. But I'm not blaming it on my parents and what they did because of that, but I think, if I were to tell them, like, I am dating, or if I'm planning to do anything with that person, they might get kind of edgy.

One concern participants shared was the apparent *shortage* of eligible Black men who, in apparent agreement with their parents, were regarded as the only appropriate potential partners. Their parents, these women explain, would want them to marry a Black man, preferably one who was born in Africa or grew up with his parents in Canada. Their parents are not so sure about Blacks with social origins outside the continent. The girls, however, lament the fact that there are very few suitable candidates, even within the larger pool of Black men.

The young women agree that their educational ambitions could, however, make the problem of finding a good mate even harder. Rose explains, "I think in Edmonton, and perhaps spreading towards the rest of Canada now, there seems to be a greater portion of ... Black females with higher degrees of education compared to males." Black young men, according to them, are not as keen to achieve in academics and the professions. All of them concurred with Rose, who insists: "I would like to be in a relationship with someone who has the same degree of education as me." They believe that there are a lot more females than males in the total population of Black youth. There are even still fewer men within the tiny group of high achievers, they claim. Even though the respondents were not concerned about the ethnicity of a potential spouse, they expressed a strong preference to marry Black men of African origins. Currently, these young women anticipate facing potential problems in the future with regards to finding a suitable mate.

Identity and Homeland

All of the informants employed a fluid assortment of identities that were rendered meaningful by their context. While the ordering of these intersecting associations could be construed as ranging from local (ethnicity, country of origin) to global (pan-Black, woman), they are not necessarily arranged in a hierarchy. As Rose observed, "I consider myself both [Black/African], but it depends on whom I am surrounded with. Like, if I am in Ghana, then I am called Canadian. If I am surrounded by Black people from here, I am considered an African or Black person." Rachel, who was born in Canada, and Myriam, who moved to this country from the Sudan, identify themselves first, but not exclusively, with their ancestral country of origin. Myriam explains, "even though I am in Canada, I am still seeing myself as a Sudanese woman from Africa. Even if I get Canadian citizenship, it's going to be on paper. So, I love to be African woman. I am African woman."

In contrast to responses from adult focus group respondents, attachment to imagined African homelands is often troubled by lack of competency in their familial language. Older family members often provide a bridge between the younger generation and other kin. Zahra, for instance, has very little contact with this homeland she talks about. According to her, "Only my dad's family

... is back home, and the kids do not speak English well. And, er ... I depend on my dad to keep me in touch with his family back home and with Eritrea." When relatives call from Africa, one of the respondents said, "I don't hear what they are saying ... I hand the phone over to mother." Sustaining native skills in the next generation is difficult. As school-age children, the much younger women like Zahra spend very little time at home. The young women identify the loss of native language as widening the generation gap between parents and children. As students, the younger generation spends most of the day with English speakers. Often, their parents, and in some cases, older siblings, are the only people they could practice these skills on. This makes even more difficult the task of parents who are determined to *Africanize* their children. With mainly parental presence and meetings with people of the country of origin, the idea of homeland is more imagined than real, and the fluid ordering of identity is only practical.

CONCLUSION

This brief overview of the responses from young, female African-Albertans represents the first step in our exploration of the process of identity formation among African immigrant and refugee women in Alberta. Our conclusions, therefore, are grounded solely in these data and are contingent upon further analyses.

As Hall (1996) notes, identities are multiple, intersecting, and at times, antagonistic. Our informants seem to be aware of these possibilities as they move through various identity contexts accompanied by networks of family, classmates, friends, co-religionists, and community members. For instance, these young women enact the sexual division of labour deemed culturally appropriate within their household and hold to the values, behaviours, and desires that will earn them the appellation of "good girls" while they reside with their parents. These perceptions not only solidify bonds with their parents and what they perceive to be their "traditional African values," but they help to demarcate the boundaries between their desire to shore up an African identity and the potential onslaught of threats to that identity posed by Canadian society. However, they further express desires to make those borders more porous, to contaminate the in-between spaces they occupy – spaces that constitute the fertile ground for cultural hybridization (Bhabha 1996).

Similar to their mothers who came here as African nationals struggling to construct an African identity, these children must strive to find their place in multicultural Canada. Given the diversity of groups that fuel this continental immigration, the scope and population for a national identity is simply not there for adjustment, adaptation, and advancement. When these young women came together to discuss their experience, they differentiated between Canadian and African features. The difficulty they have in definitively identifying African

features could also be a reflection of the unstable nature of a diaspora still in formation. But it certainly indicates a weaker access, compared to their parents, to the specificities of national, ethnic, and even smaller cultural groupings for reasons of identity. As noted earlier, the African population is vastly diverse, and the values these young women associate with being African are elucidated from their relationship with parents – individuals and couples from various parts of Africa. Many of these parents grew up in specific cultural settings. They had little need to explore the larger African identity and never knew they were Black until they came to Canada. Even as they rally around people of similar cultural values and traditions, they also recognize the need to go beyond these smaller groupings for wider and more effective support networks. As these young women clearly indicate, their own generation is likely to thrive more on the larger African and Black identities than in the country-specific ones their parents work on.

The foregoing raises a number of crucial questions regarding the balance between African and Canadian values, allegiances between African and pan-Black identities, and the relationship between language and identity. Like their parents, they see education and marriage to other Africans as essential to carrying on the dual purposes of maintaining cultural linkages to parents and ethnic origins and to fulfilling aspirations for upward mobility for themselves and their families. Whether in their parents' homes or outside in the *community*, young, first generation African women appear to be negotiating multiple identities as they make their way through Canadian society. As they establish their own households, their desires and abilities to forge hybrid identities and practices will undoubtedly become more evident. For now, they must fluidly meander through the *homeland* identity they occupy with their parents, the multicultural identity that is still under construction, and the racist (and sometimes ignorant) perceptions of Euro-Canadian society they must continually reject.

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NOTES

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.
- 2 As noted earlier, Alberta has one of the highest populations of immigrant Blacks. The African population is especially young, and although a significant number of adults were born in Canada, the majority left Africa after the mid-1980s.