COLUMBIA'S AFRICAN STUDENT ASSOCIATION DEEP IN DIASPORA WAR

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My friends and I walked into ASA (African Student Association) late, like usual. The room was filled with lively chatter, and the attendees were scattered across the room, split into discussion groups. That day, the club was discussing "hot takes and hot topics," a discussion inspired by the once popular *YouTube* series "BK Chat London." We settled on the couch and quickly got comfortable, chatting and joking about each topic that appeared on the screen. A topic about African parent stereotypes came up, and my group of friends, the comedians they are, made me laugh until I shed tears. After the group discussion ended, we watched the club come together and discuss the topic, nodding our heads and snapping. It was a productive discussion. Then, a topic concerning HBCUs vs. PWIs—Historically Black Colleges and Universities vs. Predominantly White Institutions—came up, and my group quickly veered off-topic. One of the African American members of my group made a *very* hot take about the n-word, and, when the group discussion concluded, they were pushed to share it with the club. As they spoke, the atmosphere in the room shifted instantly. Heads whipped up from phones. Faces twisted into frowns and grimaces. Strange laughter and confused chatter bounced around the lounge until a board member led the room to a hush. The evening progressed, and the room remained tense as more African Americans expressed their opinions, one of them being that there was no space for African Americans on campus, and that admissions were intentionally accepting more Africans than African Americans to top schools in an effort to promote African American erasure.

When the club meeting ended, we walked out of the room, tension sparking amongst the group like electricity. Once we reached John Jay lounge, we hurriedly took out our folders and laptops and LitHum readings to do homework. But, instead of moving our pencils across paper, we looked up at each other, tugged at the tension hung taut in the air, and moved our mouths instead. In the time that chatter prevailed over homework, some African American students made a few inflammatory comments concerning Africans, and, by the end of the conversation, my African friend had angrily blocked one of them.

As I witnessed this play out from behind my computer screen—the eyerolls, the pointed comments, the side-eyes, and private messages sent to my phone—a mixture of sadness and slight irritation settled in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to flee, to leave and go to my dorm, the bathroom, anywhere but there. I couldn't stand witnessing this sudden divide between friends, but, more importantly, I couldn't stand watching this divide within Columbia's small Black community. It made me—*makes* me—sick. Even now, as I write this, I am frustrated. I ask myself now as I did then:

why? Why do we argue and point fingers? Why does this conflict and hostility arise between African Americans and Black Africans in higher education when, after all is said and done, we're all Black students attempting to achieve the same feat?

This divide, whether it be between Black students at Columbia's African Student Association, or between members of the Black community within America, exists because of how ideas of white supremacy have manifested themselves within these two groups—African Americans and Black Africans. As a result, these groups see each other with differing levels of humanity. *This* is the reason behind the frowns and pointed comments, behind the tension in the air at Columbia's ASA. Those frowning eyes were seeing through a lens clouded by white, reducing their Black peers to a single dimension of ethnicity or, rather, a perceived notion of what that ethnicity represents, stripping us of mutual understanding and dividing us in a room that was meant to unite.

This white-supremacy-promoting division is highlighted in Onoso Imoagene's "Broken Bridges," a study about the exchange of slurs between second-generation Nigerians and African Americans, and its subsequent impact on identity formation. The findings of this study highlight white supremacy's influence on the identity-formation process. Imoagene writes that "America operates a racialized system that categorizes people by race and slots these races into a racial hierarchy that has whites at the top and blacks at the bottom," and, as a result, "ethnic diversity among black people is often underplayed" (176-7). In the eyes of white America, Black people are a "monolithic group" (177). But there is great ethnic diversity within the Black community at Columbia, and the same applies for ASA; we have members from Togo, Kenya, Cameroon, Ghana, Ethiopia, America, and more. Yet, when the acknowledgment of this diversity starts to disappear, as it did in that ASA meeting, "boundar[ies]" are drawn (181). An "us-versus-them divide" arises "between African Americans and Africans" (181). In Imoagene's study, this divide was drawn by slurs. African respondents to the interview reported being called "*African booty scratcher* because African Americans saw themselves as more civilized and superior to Africans" (181). To be an *African booty scratcher*, one must be "too dark complexioned" and "black as night"; one must be "an uncivilized person from the African jungle" and "ugly" with "a . . . (flat and broad) nose, and thick lips" (181). These *African booty scratcher* qualities clearly stem from white supremacy, a system where skin that's "black as night" "communicates one's position . . . within the dominant power structure" as "inferior" (Blay 37). In turn, to call Africans *African booty scratchers* is to dehumanize them, to solidify the position of the African as below the African American, to perpetuate the system of white supremacy that created the slur, widening the divide. In Imoagene's study, African American respondents recall hearing "*Akata*," a Yoruba word meaning "a wild cat or a wandering cat without a home" (182). This is a slur that has formed "ethnic boundaries between Nigerians and African Americans," for, to be an *Akata*, one must be "wild, rude, impetuous, aggressive, and uncultured" (182). Again, we find

white supremacy at work, feeding these narratives and "negative stereotypes" to Africans through "media's portrayal of African Americans" (183). Now, during the ASA meeting, there were no slurs said aloud. Rather, this "us-versus-them divide" was created through reactionary facial expressions and tones of voice. To egg on an African American to share their controversial opinion on the n-word, and to proceed to allow the entire club to laugh and snicker at them after they've built the courage to share it, is just as dehumanizing as calling them an *Akata*. Imoagene writes of a divide that needs biting words, but, at Columbia, the divide was present with or without words. That system of white supremacy—the urge for one group to be or *feel* superior to the other, to inch closer to the "whites at the top" within our "racial hierarchy," whether that be through mocking laughter or turned, frowning faces—shaped the divide at ASA and laid the foundation for the slurs in Imoagene's study.

The day of that club meeting, the Malcolm X Lounge, a space created for the congregation of Black students, became a space for a more exclusive group: Black Africans—and it was treated as such. The questions asked and discussions facilitated were all pointed to the first- and second-generation African experience. Yet, during this meeting in particular, the space was also shared by a few African Americans, students who couldn't contribute to the discussion of strict African parenting, who don't know enough afrobeats to choose the best song of the semester. This African American minority among the Black students within the lounge that night reflects the population of African American students among Black students at Columbia. One of the African American attendees said it themselves: "There is a lack of space for us on campus." And, throughout my short time on campus, I've heard that statement said in many different ways. Upon introducing myself to other Black students, their response is often "Why is everybody here Nigerian?" followed by a series of awkward laughs. That familiar tension rises again.

Dr. Chrystal A. George Mwangi approaches this rift in her article, "Complicating Blackness," questioning "why there is an overrepresentation of Black immigrants in higher education," (7) bringing forth the "historical context" (10) of both ethnicities within the United States and, in turn, their "racial positioning" (3). Throughout her paper, George Mwangi constantly highlights how "the arrival of new [African] immigrants has added another level of complexity regarding how race is considered" (10-11), especially in "programs/policies initially developed for historically marginalized populations" (15) like affirmative action. George Mwangi considers the argument that, within an "historical context . . . Black immigrants' race should not be positioned in the same manner as African Americans in higher education because Black immigrants are not a historically marginalized group in the United States and often arrive with high levels of . . . capital" (11). She parallels this "historical" argument with that of "racialization" (14); despite "Black immigrants' ethnic difference . . . eventually the system of racial stratification in the United States imposes a Black racial identity" (14). As a result, "Black immigrants [become] susceptible to racial

marginalization and injustices that can negatively impact their educational pursuits" (16). This conflict between arguments, this *divide*, is the same divide that occurred at ASA. Although, in George Mwangi's terms, the divide that occurred in ASA was less of a divide of physical groups—African Americans and Black Africans—but more so a divide of understanding. To some of the African Americans present at the meeting, race was more historical. Rather than merely a present condition, it was an accumulation of pasts, of generations, or, as Michelle Alexander describes it in *The New Jim Crow*, Blackness was bearing the "continuing legacy of slavery and Jim Crow" (3) and suffering "legalized discrimination . . . just as [one's] parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents once were" (1-2). It's safe to assume that this is why one of the African Americans at the meeting was so firm in their idea that non-African Americans shouldn't be saying the n-word. As Imoagene states, "slurs can become a critical part of the identity formation process" (177), and, to them, first- and second-generation Africans didn't fit into the *historical* context of their Black identity—many aren't products of the generations of society-inflicted trauma that Alexander illustrates in her essay. In response to the claim about the n-word, and after the snickering and sounds of confusion died down, a Kenyan in the club spoke up in response. They respectfully disagreed, explaining that if any of the Africans in the room were taken and placed in the Antebellum South, they too would be called and treated as the "n-word," and if any of the Africans had an encounter with the police today, they would also face the same set of risks and fears as an African American. Their response was a resounding echo of George Mwangi's "racialization."

Reexamining how ideas of white supremacy have manifested within African Americans and Black Africans with George Mwangi's argument in mind offers a more nuanced view. Rather than these groups seeing *each other* with differing levels of humanity, it seems that they see *themselves* with differing levels of humanity. Through the lens of white supremacy or, rather, through the eyes of white people, there is no difference between African Americans and Black Africans. The Africans within Columbia's ASA believe their own identities, their own humanity, is perceived this way. So, they act and think accordingly. As a result, they are left with two separate yet intertwining identities. This is what Dialika Sall demonstrates in her article "Convergent Identifications, Divergent Meanings: The Racial and Ethnic Identities of Second-Generation West African Youth." "[S]econd-generation Black immigrant youth," like the members of Columbia's ASA, "no longer choose between a Black racial identity and an ethnic identity" (Sall 137). Rather, they "identify simultaneously as both Black and with their nationality-based ethnicities" (137). At first glance, it seems that this idea of simultaneous identities and my developed claim of white supremacy causing groups to view themselves with a different level of humanity does not fit with the concept of historical and racialized identity perception. However, a focus on Africans, or African students in particular, puts the pieces together. Because this group sees itself as (monolithically) Black through both racialization and the lens

of white supremacy, it ends up working to distance itself from that identity while simultaneously holding on to it, creating a push-and-pull that attempts to dodge this internal conflict. Like Sall, Tamar Becker affirms this in the article "Black Africans and Black Americans on an American Campus: The African View." In an exploration of relations between "Africans and [B]lack Americans on the UCLA campus" (168), Becker writes that, by "emphasizing their special [African] identity," Africans are able to "take on the role of the detached observer of racial strife [or Blackness] in the United States" (179), which "softens the impact of unpleasant experiences they are bound to encounter due to their race" (172).

With Becker's and Sall's words in mind, let's turn back to that ASA meeting. There was a moment in the meeting when African American students spent some time voicing concerns about the lack of space for them on campus. In response, one of the ASA members offered BSO (Black Student Organization) as an example of a space for African Americans. They didn't find that answer adequate. They then spoke about how Columbia's BSO played a few afrobeats during a cookout event, rather than prioritizing more traditional cookout songs. Members of the board quickly agreed and provided them with resources to address their concerns, and the room swiftly slipped into silence. That silence spoke volumes. It echoed the ideas of Sall and Becker, for the first- and second-generation African members of ASA, like myself, hold simultaneous identities of African and Black-in-America. In the same way Black Africans and African Americans conflict with one another, those identities conflict as well. That conflict resulted in the resounding silence that settled in the room when African American students expressed that they had no space for them—we occupied two spaces where, seemingly, they occupied none. We could not relate to their grievances.

The African Student Association was one of my favorite clubs at Columbia, and it still is. At first, the knowledge that the club I'd dedicated my Monday nights to wasn't as flawless as I originally envisioned had saddened me. This white-supremacy-fueled divide, whether it be between African American and Black African students, or between the Black and African identities within oneself, is a roadblock that I, as a second-generation African, find difficult to overcome. Yet, through careful examination of various studies and articles, an understanding of this divide has been developed, and with this newfound knowledge we can work to create a space where African American and Black African students can thrive in harmony. Most of the African American students who attended the ASA meeting detailed here haven't appeared at another meeting since. Perhaps we could start by inviting them once more and facilitating a discussion where we can all feel welcome.

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