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An Intersectional Understanding of African International Graduate Students' Experiences in U.S.  
Higher Education

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### Abstract

The adjustment of African international students in the United States may be different from the experiences of international students from other regions as African students are considered racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. who can be exposed to racism, nativism, and other discrimination. This study focuses on the structural systems impacting African international graduate students in the U.S. and the intercentricity of various forms of opportunities and oppressions impacting their experiences. Findings revealed four themes: (1) Assumptions made by American Peers and Faculty (2) Adjustment Challenges Situated within Campus Systems (3) Campus Internationalization Rhetoric (4) Conflicting Worldviews. While these themes illustrate how students' experience negative social positioning and other challenges on their campuses, they also demonstrate students resisting marginalizing experiences.

Key Words: International students, Intersectionality, African students, Graduate students, Student transition

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Although India and China remain the top countries of origin for international students in the United States, international students come from more than 100 countries all over the world (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016). For example, Sub-Saharan Africans are among the fastest growing foreign-born populations in the United States (Hernandez, 2012) and the U.S. higher education system is the first point of contact for many Africans, who often migrate temporarily to pursue an undergraduate or graduate education (Arthur, 2000). Since 2001, over 30,000 students from sub-Saharan Africa were enrolled annually in U.S. universities and in 2014/2015, the number of international students from this region grew by 8%, which is the largest increase in recent years (IIE, 2015, Kent, 2007). Despite strong and growing African student enrollment in U.S. higher education, there is little research focusing on their educational experiences.

Yet, scholars do suggest that the adjustment of Black African international students may be different from the experiences of White international students (Warren & Constantine, 2007). This is in part because in the United States, African international students are considered racial/ethnic minorities who are exposed to racism, nativism, and other discrimination (Author, 2014; Hanassab, 2006). Given the unique positionality of Africans in the United States and their growing presence in U.S. higher education, our study seeks to understand the experiences of sub-Saharan African international graduate students within broader U.S. campus and societal contexts.

Scholars often place onus on international students to navigate their campuses, rather than considering how the campus environment can better work to support these students (Lee &

Rice, 2007). The purpose of our paper is to focus on the role of structural systems impacting African international graduate students in the United States and the intercentricity of various forms of opportunities and oppressions impacting their experience. Specifically, we ask the research questions: How do African international graduate students experience the academic and social transition to college in the United States? What is the role of campus structures and climate in the transition and success of African international graduate students in the United States? Our study investigates student adjustment and transitions from a critical lens in order to create greater understanding of African international graduate students. We use multi-level intersectionality theory (Núñez, 2014) to examine the U.S. societal structures and campus climate related factors that contribute to these students' experiences.

### **Literature Review**

In the 2015-2016 academic year, U.S. colleges and universities saw a seven percent increase from the previous year in the number of international students they host on their campuses. The number of international students enrolled in these universities also reached a new high, surpassing the one million mark for the first time (IIE, 2016). Yet, in 2015, international graduate students comprised 14.2 percent of all graduate students in the United States, while international undergraduates comprised only 3.3 percent of all undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). This means that approximately, one out of five graduate students in the United States are international students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The Council of Graduate Schools reports that in graduate fields such as computer science and engineering, the total share of international students enrolled in programs compared with U.S citizens and permanent residents often exceeds fifty percent (Okahana & Zhou, 2017).

While there is limited literature on the educational experiences of African international graduate students in the United States, there is a small body of scholarship on international

graduate students more broadly. Researchers find that peers and faculty treat international graduate students differently than their American counterparts based on English language skills/accent, cultural differences, and social identities such as nationality, religion, and race (Kim, 2010; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Wang, 2008). For example, when international students' intellectual or academic capabilities are negatively and wrongly judged because of limited English proficiency or an accent, their answers in class may be ignored or their peers may not be willing to ask for clarification (Kim, 2010; Wang, 2008). International graduate students have shown that if they do not believe their English speaking abilities are strong then they are less likely to participate in class and interact with their fellow peers (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Wang, 2008). This can be especially challenging because classes taught in the United States often have expectations of in-class participation and/or working in groups, whereas in many countries in-class participation is low (Kim, 2010). Thus, perceived limited English language proficiency can negatively affect international students' overall sense of belonging, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

In order to mitigate some of these challenges, social supports can act as coping resources for students and are believed to have both direct effects on psychological adjustments and buffering effects on life stresses (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Trice, 2004). Social support can be present in diverse ways such as having family in the home or host country, having a spouse or significant other in the home or host country, and friends who actively participate in students' lives. Research shows that strong contact and relationships with American students positively influences international students' academic experiences (Hendrickson, Rosen & Aune, 2011; Trice, 2004). These relationships are quite valuable because they supply access to information about cultural norms, insight into how organizational units operate (e.g., hierarchies in higher educational settings), any explicit and implicit rules, and potential knowledge of the U.S. labor

market (Hendrickson et al., 2011; Trice, 2004). They also have the benefit of emotional and moral support (Trice, 2004). However, international students tend to socialize with other international students and interact the least with American students (Rose-Redwood, 2010). One reason for this is that international student friends may better understand the experiences and challenges of other international students (Author, 2014; Woolf, 2007). Another is due to issues such as language barriers and cultural differences between international students and their American peers (Author, 2014).

Because this article focuses on African international students, it is important to note that a number of studies demonstrate that international students of Color (primarily from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and Africa) perceive more discrimination from U.S. students and faculty than their White international student peers (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2007; Trice, 2004). Thus, in addition to the transitional challenges experienced by most international students, international students of Color may also experience social isolation due to racial prejudice, being called racial slurs, and other forms of harassment (Constantine, Anderson, LaVerne, Caldwell & Utsey, 2005; Author 2014; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). Thus, racism and nativism often impact international students' campus experiences in academic and social spaces. These experiences can negatively impact international students' college success and well-being as discrimination is found to increase their homesickness, decrease learning outcomes, self-esteem, and engagement as well as lead to academic withdrawal and self-isolation (Author, 2014; Karuppan & Barari, 2010; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2002).

Given the extant research on international students of Color demonstrating that they experience racial discrimination, it is also relevant to consider literature on the experiences of

Black American graduate students who share similar experiences. For example, numerous scholars have documented that Black American graduate students across disciplines experience isolation, forced representation of their race/tokenism, negative stereotyping regarding their academic aptitude, lack of diverse perspectives in the graduate curriculum, microaggressions, and overt racial hostility (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Valdez, 2011; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; Robinson, 2012). Furthermore, although strong relationships with faculty are critical in graduate education, Black American students experience less faculty mentoring, advising, and research opportunities than their White peers (Felder, 2010; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Nettles & Millett, 2006). These experiences can negatively impact Black Americans students' overall well-being, satisfaction with their graduate programs, and ability to successfully complete their graduate degree (Gasman et al., 2008; Golde, 2005; Nettles & Millett, 2006). Some of the factors that mitigate the negative racial climate for Black American students includes support from family and peers, financial support from their institution or other organizations (e.g., fellowships, scholarships), faculty mentoring and advising, and other targeted interventions that provide guidance and support for graduate students of Color in navigating graduate school (Gay, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008; Simon, 2010). We recognize that Black African international students' and Black American students' perceptions of their racial identity, U.S. racial structures, and racism will likely differ due to different forms of socialization (Author, 2014, 2016). Yet, research also highlights that U.S. social constructions of Blackness creates a homogenous view of Black people in which ethnicity and nationality are commonly ignored by the majority (Author, 2014). Because the African graduate students in our study are Black, they may experience similar forms of discrimination that their Black American peers experience (Author, 2014, 2016). Therefore, this literature



provides some relevancy that can both inform our study as well as provide work to build upon from Black international graduate student' lived experiences in the United States.

Overall, while research illustrates the transition experiences of international students in U.S. universities, much of this scholarship aggregates all international students as a singular group. This is problematic because characteristics such as educational level (e.g., graduate, undergraduate), country/region of origin, race, and other social identities can impact both how students are perceived on their campuses as well as how students engage their campuses. Our study focuses on African international graduate students in order to provide a nuanced understanding of this group of students who are growing in enrollment within U.S. higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Our paper is framed using multi-level intersectionality theory guided by Núñez's (2014) conceptual model of intersectionality for educational research. Building from Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality and drawing from Anthias' (2013) work that challenges a unitary framing of intersectionality, Núñez (2014) proposes a multidimensional lens that focuses not only on individual social identities, but the broader social landscape of power dynamics and structure that influence human experiences and life opportunities. Intersectionality by its nature is complex, with social categorizations such as race, class, and gender interconnecting and creating overlapping systems of disadvantage and discrimination that influence inequities (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality theory therefore invites us to examine broader social dynamics as based on and related to individuals' multiple-identities. However, focusing only on individual level identities is problematic as it neglects the broader "economic, social, and political practices that perpetuate these inequities" while ascribing inequities to perceived (de)merits and (in)abilities of marginalized individuals or groups (Núñez, 2014, p. 88).

Given the literature on international graduate students in the United States, in order to understand the experiences of African graduate students it is imperative to extend the focus to social identities as constituted within social systems of domination and power. Moving beyond a micro-level examination of international students' positionality to how their multiple identities overlap and interconnect with broader societal and university factors, this paper adopts Núñez's (2014) proposed three distinct levels of intersectionality analysis: (1) Social Categories and Relations, which involves defining social categories and their influence on social positions, divisions, and hierarchies. These categories are socially constructed, hence are not neatly bounded because students have diverse and multiple identities. (2) Multiple Arenas of Influence/Social Arenas, embodied practices, which interlink with each other and are articulated within different societal arenas or contexts. These are domains of power which include, "(a) organizational (e.g., positions in structures of society such as work, family, and education), (b) representational (e.g., discursive processes), (c) intersubjective (e.g., relationships between individuals and members of groups), and (d) experiential (e.g., narrative sensemaking)" (Núñez, 2014, p. 88). (3) Historicity, a broader inquiry of social divisions and their outcomes and processes within a specific time frame.

By adopting multi-level intersectionality theory this paper advances education research that goes beyond "emphasizing individuals' experiences with social identities by examining the systems of power and oppression that shape these experiences" (Núñez, 2014, p. 85). The model works well for the research participants because it places a spotlight on dominant power structures, relations, and social systems that influence, enhance or constrain student experiences. Additionally, it investigates other dimensions of difference such as immigration/visa status and native country of origin along with the intersections of more commonly researched identities such as race and ethnicity.

### **Methods**

This paper utilizes counterstories, an approach introduced by Critical Race Theorist Derrick Bell (1987) and first adapted for use in education research by Solórzano and Yosso (2002). Counterstories tell the stories of people who are often overlooked in academic scholarship and education discourse as a means to examine, critique, and counter majoritarian (or master) narratives. Specifically we use the form of counterstorytelling known as other peoples' stories/narratives, which allow us to provide the narratives of African graduate students' experiences with racism, nativism, and other forms of marginalization within the current sociopolitical context (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This form of analysis aligns with the use of a multi-level intersectionality framework as both intersectionality and counterstorytelling stem from a critical worldview.

### **Study Site and Sample**

This study is part of a larger, mixed methods project on the educational experiences of international graduate students conducted at a large, public research institution in New England. New England is well established in the United States as an area committed to education, both in the number of academic institutions and its relatively well-educated population. For example, according to U.S. Census (2016) data, 90.3% of all New Englanders have completed high school or more, and 35% of the population has a bachelors degree or higher. Its political leanings tend to be aligned with more progressive policies, including a commitment to multiculturalism and diversity despite a demographic lack of racial diversity: using both the data and the demographic categories of the U.S. Census (2016), 88.7% of New Englanders are White, 5.5% are Black or African-American, 7.6% Hispanic, 3.6% Asian, 0.9% American Indian, and 2.4% cite more than one 'racial' category.

In the immediate area of the research site, approximately 80% of the permanent town population identifies as White and 7% as African-American/Black, although this latter percentage drops to 5% the closer you travel to the university (U.S. Census, 2015). Median annual household income is slightly over \$50,000 for the region, although when disaggregated for race, median annual household income for White families is approximately \$100,000 while for Black families it is roughly \$25,000. Nearly two-thirds of Black families in the town surrounding the university are classified as living in poverty, more than double the percentage of White families. Within this context, the town of our research site economically revolves around the university. The university's town has engaged in events and messaging that welcomes racial, ethnic, religious diversity, but at the same time, has also been criticized for a colonial White savior mentality. One example being a large box in a prominent place in town that states in big, bold letters "Africans Need Your Shoes."

The university is the area's largest employer, and the demographics of the faculty, support staff, and administrators in general reflect the demographics of New England. According to the university's office for institutional research, approximately three-quarters of the undergraduate students are in-state students and approximately 8% are international students. At the graduate level, the numbers are more evenly balanced with approximately one-third of graduate students being in state and 27% comprised of international students. Four percent of undergraduate students and 4% of graduate students identify as African-American/Black. However, these numbers only include domestic students as the university only reports nativity status of international students and not race.

This proposal focuses on two subsets of participants from the study. The first are a sample of thirteen African international graduate students. Students' home countries include Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Senegal. Their programs of study include

communications, education, economics, engineering, biology, and English. The length of time spent in the United States ranged from two and a half months to eight years (see Table 1 for participant demographic characteristics).

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years spent in the U.S.</b>
Nana	Ghana	Male	1.5 years in current graduate program and 2 years prior
Chiso	Malawi	Male	2.5 years in current graduate program and 4.5 years prior
Tony	Malawi	Male	2.5 months in current graduate program
Jen	Malawi	Female	8 months in current graduate program and 2 years prior
Ken	Malawi	Male	2 years in current graduate program
Celina	Nigeria	Female	5 years in current graduate program and 2 years prior
Neyo	Nigeria	Male	1 years in current graduate program
Tunde	Nigeria	Male	2 years in current graduate program
Thelonias	Rwanda	Male	4 years in current graduate program and 4 years prior
Mariam	Senegal	Female	3 years in current graduate program and 1 year prior
Nyasha	Zimbabwe	Female	1 year in current graduate program
Zivo	Zimbabwe	Female	3 years in current graduate program and 2.5 years prior
Thandeka	Zimbabwe	Female	Less than 1 year in current graduate program and 3 years prior

The second subset of the sample is ten faculty and campus administrators who either work directly with international graduate students and/or work with graduate student programming/ services on the campus. This included:

- A faculty member who also serves as a senior administrator for the academic affairs division and the graduate school
- A faculty member who also leads the university's internationalization committee
- A faculty member who also serves as a graduate program director
- A faculty member who leads an initiative in international education
- A senior staff member focused on diversity and recruitment
- Two staff members who work for the graduate student governance body
- Two senior administrators who work in international student support services
- A staff member who works with student legal issues and immigration

**Data Collection**

This proposal focuses on the qualitative component of the study, in which data was collected in two phases. First, we recruited student participants via an email sent to international graduate students, posted recruitment flyers in academic buildings, and engaged in snowball sampling. Participants engaged in an individual semi-structured interview ranging from 45 minutes to 120 minutes. Interview questions addressed participants' decision to enroll at the university, their transition to the university, their social supports and networks, and any strategies and resources used to navigate the graduate experience. During the second phase, recruitment emails were sent to university faculty and administrators who work with international graduate students or work with graduate student programming. Participants engaged in an individual semi-structured interview ranging from 30 to 60 minutes. Interview questions addressed campus internationalization efforts, how participants' perceive international graduate students, and participants' involvement in initiatives related to international graduate students. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms used to provide participant confidentiality.

**Data Analysis**

All interview transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO qualitative data analysis software. Data analysis occurred in several iterative stages. First, the research team read the data as a form of preliminary analysis to document initial reflections and interpretations as well as to identify guiding themes about the college context (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2014; Stage & Manning, 2016). During this time we wrote analytic memos documenting emergent themes within and across participants' narratives. We generated a list of themes both deductively using the theoretical framework and interview protocol themes as well as inductively (Merriam, 2009). Examples of initial themes include campus adjustment, dealing with prejudice, and campus resources. Next, we read and wrote analytic memos about the administrator and faculty interview

transcripts. We used the themes developed from the initial analysis of the student interviews to guide our interpretation, with particular attention paid to how the faculty and administrators perceived and framed African international students regarding these themes. For example, one of the themes found within the student transcripts was campus resources. Thus, within the faculty/administrator transcripts we investigated how these faculty/administrators discussed campus resources that are available for international students. We found two consistent patterns within the data highlighting that (1) international student services were primarily responsible for providing resources to international students and (2) international students themselves often came together to navigate campus processes on their own. Lastly, we returned to the student participant interviews to investigate and analyze relevant examples within their narratives that countered dominant narratives experienced by student participants, discussed by faculty/administrator participants, and found within literature on international students in the U.S. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, many participants countered the faculty/staff narrative regarding campus resources by stating that multiple university offices should play a role in supporting international students and that the onus should be on the campus to support students, not on the students themselves. Overall, this data analysis revealed four major themes: (1) Assumptions made by American Peers and Faculty; (2) Adjustment Challenges Situated within Campus Systems; (3) Campus Internationalization and Diversity Rhetoric; and (4) Conflicting Worldviews and Practices.

### **Limitations**

Our findings were consistent across the different contexts (e.g., graduate programs, countries of origin) of the student participants. However, we recognize the themes and experiences identified in this article may be different for other populations of international graduate students including other African international graduate students. We do not expect our

findings and analysis to be generalizable to all students who fit this demographic. Instead, we use a critical lens to emphasize students' educational experiences and perspectives and seek to increase the transferability of the study through detailed methods and the use of thick, rich description and extensive quotes throughout our findings (Krefting, 1999).

### **Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Several steps were taken by the research team to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We were able to triangulate our findings using two primary strategies. As multiple researchers were involved in the data analysis, we were able to engage in investigator or analyst triangulation (Denzin, 1978). This allowed us to illuminate findings and engage with the data in a more comprehensive way than if the study was done by an individual researcher. Secondly, as part of a larger case study, we were able to place our data in the context of multiple forms of data. For example, student interview transcripts were triangulated with administrator/faculty interviews to confirm participants' narratives. This allowed us to triangulate our findings through multiple data sources to increase trustworthiness (Krefting, 1999). While we do not suggest that each source provided the same data/narratives, engaging multiple data sources provided a richer and more detailed understanding of students' educational experiences.

Considering positionality and engaging in reflexivity (e.g., the process of self-examination and self-disclosure) are crucial parts of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). We as researchers acknowledge that our identities intersect with the study and shape our perceptions of students' narratives. The research team includes three individuals: one doctoral student and two faculty members. The doctoral student identifies as a Black, woman international student who originates from sub-Saharan Africa. One of the faculty members is a White woman from Britain who was an international student in the United States while in graduate school. The other faculty



member is a Black American woman with an immigrant heritage. Given our positionalities relative to this study, we believed that who we were, how we identified, and how we were perceived could provide both benefits and challenges in working with the students, faculty, and administrator participants. We worked to ensure the trustworthiness of our data by engaging in reflexivity. For example, we engaged in reflexive dialogue as a research team about our interpretations of what we were experiencing throughout the study and during data analysis.

### **Findings**

In presenting our findings, we begin with an overview of the master narrative, which integrates the voices of the faculty and administrator participants in order to provide evidence of how the master narrative presents itself in the research site. Next, we present four themes reflecting the ways in which student participants experience the master narratives and counter it. We incorporate participant quotes as headings for these themes to highlight the nuanced lived experiences that the themes reflect: (1) “Some People Make it Sound like They Saved You” - Assumptions made by American peers and faculty; (2) “The Things We are Doing on Our Own Which I Think the School Should” - Adjustment challenges situated within campus systems; (3) “I Don’t Think the Priorities are on the International Students” - Campus internationalization and diversity rhetoric; (4) “Everything is Based on U.S. Standard” - Conflicting worldviews and practices. Additionally, given the focus on the counterstories of African international graduate students, we only present student participants’ quotes within the four themes in order to center on their voices and narratives. While these themes often illustrate how students’ experience negative social positioning and other challenges on their campuses, they also demonstrate students resisting marginalizing experiences.

### **Master Narrative**

The master narrative is influenced by issues related to immigration/nativism and race/racism in the United States as well as how this context informs the ways that universities perceive and engage with international students, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa. *E pleribus unum*, or “out of many, one” is the United States' de facto motto. Whether through forced/involuntary migration or voluntary migration, the United States encourages a melting pot ideology for individuals who enter. In early immigration literature, immigrants were expected to assimilate to American norms and values in order to achieve upward mobility, even while simultaneously racist, classist, and otherwise inequitable social structures in the United States make this more challenging for some groups than others (Gordon 1964; Portes, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Warner & Srole 1945). Although current research describes multiple paths for assimilation/acculturation among non-White populations in the United States, the master narrative of who truly belongs reflects those who are White, English-speaking, male, Christian, and financially stable (Alba & Nee, 2003; Gans, 1992; Huntington, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Much of the research on adaptive patterns of non-Whites and immigrants serve to create and reinforce categories of the “other” in how they develop identities in relation to the hegemonic “one.” This can be especially true for sub-Saharan African transnationals in the United States given the lack of acknowledgement and marginalization of African worldview and cultures as well as the domination of Eurocentric worldviews and systems in the United States (Hart, 2010; Higgs, 2007). In the U.S. context, the portrayal of Africa as a primitive continent creates “in addition to a racial tax, African immigrants pay a cultural tax, the devaluation of their human capital in a society where things African are routinely negatively stereotyped and despised” (Zezeza, 2009, p. 41). In the United States, sub-Saharan African immigrants’ home countries, cultures and identities are typically ignored, negatively stereotyped, or not understood in a contemporary context (Awokoya, 2012; Okpalaoka & Dillard, 2012).

On university campuses, this master narrative is present in higher education literature and practice in two primary ways. One is in the portrayal of international students as a homogenous group, in which all students are solely labeled as “foreign,” without acknowledging their diversity or the intersections of their identities. Some scholars have criticized extant literature on the educational experiences of international students for combining all into one monolithic group, not accounting for differences in countries of origin, social class, race, religion, or other characteristics (Lee & Rice, 2007). This perception was also present in our data. For example, one faculty member who is also an administrator for the graduate school explained that he tends to think of international students as Chinese or Indian because of their higher presence on the campus and that these students “are well provided for by their own nationality, there's networks and stuff like that...they have got this all sorted out” in terms of support in the college transition. Yet, as a result of the interview with our research team he came to the conclusion that, “the thing to do is, and I haven't really thought about this before, is to focus on these much smaller groups coming from countries where they are really going to be the only person, or one of five people, or whatever.” Although a major part of this participant’s role is to serve graduate students (one-quarter of whom are international), he still had never considered how some international students may be the only one from their country or one of very few and thus may need additional support. His suggestion that because a critical mass of a particular nationality of international graduate students exists frees the university from responsibility in supporting them is also problematic. Yet, the overarching perspective is that international graduate students are solely seen as “international,” without further consideration of the diversity present within that identifier. This dehumanizes international students as one-dimensional. A staff member who works with the graduate student governance body explained how multiple identities impact these students in stating,

sometimes they don't feel safe or know where to go, with what particular background they come from, being a woman or woman of color, sometimes coming from a specific country, developing country, sometimes for a specific country because of the relationship with the USA. They feel vulnerable... This is another particular vulnerability of the international students, they face, because of their religion, identity, everything... there are sometimes intersectionality.

This participant saw students struggling with multiple marginalized identities that together made them feel vulnerable in university spaces, but also unsure of where to seek support. By disaggregating data to understand the experiences of international graduate students from sub-Saharan Africa, our study serves as a counter the majoritarian narrative that international students are "all the same" or can all be served in the same way. Further, the subsequent student narratives demonstrate the nuanced experiences and needs of international students given their multiple positionalities.

Another aspect of the majoritarian narrative connects back to the aforementioned notion of assimilation in the United States, as the expectation that international students should assimilate or acculturate to the dominant campus culture. For example, much of the literature on the educational experiences of international students includes recommendations that implied the need for them to assimilate to dominant White/Western/American norms or engages in strategies to cope with their difficulties (e.g., de Araujo, 2011; Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2011), rather than emphasizing how host institutions can establish more accepting and inclusive cultures. Participants in our study also discussed that there is an implicit belief (sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious) on the campus that becoming "Americanized/Westernized" is desired by and for the international students in general ways beyond their academics. One staff member expressed,

Why you're not giving the training to the White women and men that there will be people from different countr[ies] based on different identity, different color and they have very different ways of thinking. Their experience is different and you can actually respect them, however, diversified they are. Why always the international student? I feel like it's more like, "Come international students. We are giving you training. This is this stuff and then you become more like Americans. We are making you more Americans."

When assimilation into the dominant campus culture is held up as the ideal for mitigating negative and discriminatory experiences, it removes the responsibility from universities to change their negative campus climate. For example, a graduate faculty program director explained that much of the orientation for international graduate students focuses on preparation for teaching assistantships and "much of the emphasis is on language skills. If you have a lesser degree of proficiency in English, how will that affect your goal as a TA?...I just haven't heard much about other lines of networking and support and welcoming and transitioning efforts." In this case, while TA training is important, it seems more focused on ensuring the graduate students are successful in their engagement with the undergraduates they are teaching (which also serves the university) than in the experiences of the graduate students themselves.

Conversely, within our findings, student participants' narratives provide opportunities for growing awareness of their challenges, needs, and successes, rather than a focus on whether and how they can change or assimilate.

### **"Some People Make it Sound like They Saved You"**

Participants described encountering barriers on their campus due to assumptions made about them by American peers and faculty. They ascribed these assumptions to their countries of origin, race, age, and/or gender. Nyasha discussed how she is treated by some White, American faculty members, "It's very disturbing when somebody...keeps telling you that you have an

assistantship here, someone is paying for you...when some people make it sound like they saved you from a place and they brought you here...It's very condescending." Pointing to her multiple minoritized identities, she goes on to state, "I felt like maybe it's because I'm African or I'm Black." One student described feeling like she could only present one social identity at a time as a teaching assistant because her students tended to only see her one dimensionally, "Now that I'm teaching I always have to think about that on the first day of class, what do I want to be? Do I want to be Black or do I want to be African?" For Tunde, his age in addition to other social identities left him the "odd man out" in his graduate program,

I discover[ed] in my class I'm more like the odd person. Every other person, they are all White, so I was just my only self, actually my accent wasn't like their own and...I left university for my bachelors degree maybe in 2002, that was a very long time ago. As a matter of fact I finished my high school in 1992 and that was the year of birth for some of my current classmates.

Zivo explained having a number of experiences with assumptions and prejudicial statements made towards her by campus members that have left her confused,

A lot of the times you think you're crazy because you're not sure if it's you or did I misunderstand? Did they mean bad? Maybe they're just asking because they genuinely don't know...You feel like you're going crazy. It's the questioning yourself, is my accent really that bad?

Like Zivo, many participants experienced assumptions made about their social identities, which also negatively impacted their academic and social experiences at the university.

Additionally, a number of students stated that they were not prepared for the racism, nativism, and other forms of discrimination they experienced on their campuses. One participant explained, "Even during the orientation, no one gets into detail about what people may say to

you that seem offensive...the experiences and how you might get frustrated.” For example, one student received complaints about having an editing job in the Writing Center because “she's from Francophone Africa and people don't seem to think that she should be...in charge of things like that when she is not native English.” Because of a lack of preparation for how to deal with these issues, students were not always sure who to go to or how to handle them when they arose.

Contrary to the assumptions made about them, students in the study often came from high social standing in their home countries with strong academic and professional credentials. Thus, the negative and downward social positioning placed upon them in the United States created dissonance. Zivo explained that she often has to prove her aptitude and abilities,

I always have to that first class go through my resume...I have three degrees, I have two Master's degrees and been in the U.S. for more than five years. Yes I'm African but I've been here a while, I understand these things, don't worry about it.

In addition, most students described a desire to go back to their home countries after finishing their degree programs, whereas they perceived many of their American peers assuming that they wanted to stay in the United States. For example, Nyasha explained coming to the United States was not ideal, “Initially, I didn't want to leave Zimbabwe. I wanted to do my graduate studies in Zimbabwe, but they didn't have such a program. It was also because I was loving my job [in Zimbabwe] so much.” While graduate school in the United States presented an opportunity, students were leaving family members and professions behind in their home countries to come to the United States. The assumption that their home countries in Africa were not desirable places to live or that they would not want to return to their home countries was most often not accurate.

### **“The Things We are Doing on Our Own Which I Think the School Should”**

While there is a broad narrative of U.S. universities encouraging international student enrollment as a means of diversifying and internationalizing their campuses, student participants

described a lack of basic supports and resources needed to be successful once they enrolled. Some of these issues are related to federal policies (e.g., student visas) as Thelonius described, “As an international student...because of my F1 visa, I'm limited to the options I have as to forms of income.” In addition to these federal laws, a lack of employment opportunities through their academic programs created limitations in being able to work and make the money needed to meet financial needs, “Then there's financial stability. I have a ten-hour assistantship, which is not enough at all. So it's stressful...” Similarly another participant explained,

Here it's a constant worry and because I'm on a nine-month contract. You know the summer is coming so you have to start thinking in the fall, next summer what am I going to do, what do I do about summer? It turns into this big thing, worrying about three months when you are not paid...bills still come even though you're not being paid.

For the participants in this study, financial concerns were a major issue that distracted them from their academic work and created a great deal of stress.

Students found that their campus did not have systems in place providing the necessary support to navigate housing options and financial challenges or achieve food security. Thus, many students found themselves navigating these issues themselves or in informal ways. For example, one participant explained that her roommate's wife connected her to a local food bank when she struggled with food security, “I didn't have enough money but she helped me getting set up for food bank. Initially when I got there it was like, ‘oh my gosh, I have to hide my face or I should go late.’” Students also described getting conflicting information about deadlines and funding from the university, which negatively impacted their financial resources. Thandeka explained,

The other thing is I also wasn't very familiar with how higher education in the U.S. works in terms of those funding issues. Assistantships all these things I didn't really know



about. I was lucky to have my roommate because she told me all about that. At times it was a little unnerving to not hear back [from the university] in a timely manner.

Participants explained that they did not always know about campus resources available to assist them with these challenges, which led them to turn to informal sources such as friends and roommates.

In order to navigate some of the challenges they experienced, African graduate students began organizing themselves to help newcomers as Tunde explained,

Now when people [new African students] are coming...we arrange people, we get things from people who are graduating, they donate their items, so as people come we say, "Well, we have a bed for you, we have furniture." These are the things we are doing on our own which I think the school should really do that.

African graduate students also helped each other secure housing,

I think the support wasn't enough, because when I came I had to look for other African students to help me in a way. Yes, so before arrival I got in touch with some other African students I haven't met before and...was able to connect me to another Nigerian here. I think he accommodated me for like ten days...and in the period of that ten days he assisted me to be able to get a place of my own which I eventually lived in.

Participants described building networks with other African graduate students for assistance in meeting many of their basic needs, sharing resources, information, and knowledge, and learning university processes. Although these social networks were informal, they were very helpful in connecting students to what they needed to successfully navigate their university experience.

### **"I Don't Think the Priorities are on the International Students"**

Participants discussed campus internationalization being a major goal of their university, but not feeling like they were a prioritized part of that plan. For example, two main issues

highlighted were unmet expectations/unique needs of international graduate students and, perceived gaps in the inclusivity of African cultures. None of the student participants felt that their campus prioritized the needs of international students. Tunde explained,

I don't think they really have much priority on international students. Maybe they just want them to come and to fill the gap, to maybe it's the affirmative action...I don't think there is so much priority on you coming [because you] just have to struggle your own, you have to find resources of your own...I think they still need to do more...I don't think the priorities are on the international students.

He goes on to express that offices and departments on the campus need to work together to help international graduate students, "I think they are not really doing much as it is, like maybe there is a disconnect between the [international student office] and the [academic] departments and the graduate school, they have to work together. They have to be at synergy." Many participants described having diverse needs that could be best served through the collaboration of multiple university services. However, most participants believed that despite a heavy emphasis on internationalization, the university focused most of their energy on domestic and/or undergraduate students. Thandeka illustrated this in stating, "I think this comes back to the fact that [the university] is so big and my perception [is] that the undergrads are really the life of the university. I feel like international grad students, we're just on the periphery." Similarly, Nyasha explained, "there are also things or opportunities or fellowships or projects that are mostly American student-focused or that prioritize American students...I don't think they deliberately prioritize, but I just feel like it's [part of] a structure." For the participants in this study, although internationalization encompasses international students, they did not view themselves as a critical part of that process in comparison to other university priorities.

Diversity was another buzzword that participants heard being of high importance on their campus. However, like with internationalization, they also saw challenges with how diversity was represented. One participant explained,

I was having a conversation with a friend of mine just the other day. I was talking about how I love my classes and just being back in school but, on the other hand, it's the least diverse place I've ever lived in...It is something that I've been very conscience of. Maybe I feel that way because I'm coming from a school where...there were many African students. They were all from across the continent. There was always this feeling of cultural enrichment...whereas here you have to look for it.

Participants primarily described a lack of ethnic diversity and the predominant Whiteness of their campus, which was a major contrast from many who came from predominantly Black countries with high levels of ethnic diversity. Thelonius found this lack of campus diversity as particularly stark within his STEM program, “In the science department there are very few of us in the STEM programs. There’s not enough Black people in the STEM fields...and there’s definitely not enough Africans in the STEM fields.” This lack of other Black and/or African students made participants feel a sense of isolation and difference from their classmates. Yet, challenges with diversity and being represented were also perceived beyond structural diversity (e.g., the number of diverse individuals on the campus). For example, Tunde explained,

For us if you go to the dining [hall] you get Asian food everything, but no African food. No African food. So that is why they I think they care more about the Asians, the Indians but ...Not seeing [at] all African no, so to me that’s even indicative of the fact that they don’t care much about people from Africa.

For Tunde, not seeing food from his home country, or even home continent, reflected in what was served at the university made him feel less prioritized in that space. This and other symbols challenged the sense of belonging that participants had on their campus.

### **“Everything is Based on U.S. Standard”**

Adjusting to graduate student life in the United States came with particular challenges for students who had not attended college in the United States as undergraduates. These challenges often reflected differences in worldviews and practices from how the students were socialized in their home country versus expectations in the United States. For example, most participants discussed the classroom as a site of various challenges including participation expectations, dominant U.S context dialogues, limited space for multicultural perspectives as well as conflicting worldviews such as competition versus collaboration, and collectivism versus individualism. Zivo explained that in her home country, “We're brought up that you speak it if you're 100 percent sure this is correct. This idea of speaking out on something that isn't necessarily correct and is just your opinion, not backed by anyone actually seems weird.” However, her professors expected students to engage in discussion and questions the texts they were reading, which was difficult for her because,

By the time you are certain you should say something the conversation has already moved way past...It's that initial period where it's the learning to talk out, the learning to questions things. I realize how it's difficult to critique things. We're not taught those things, just critiquing stuff. Their name is on books, they're great, they're amazing, everything they write is amazing. The idea that you then are able to read it and be able to say there's flaws in this thinking, there's flaws in that. Who are you to judge them [scholars]? You [graduate student] have nothing on them.

A number of participants explained feeling anxiety about participating in class because of the negative treatment they received due to having an accent or due to level of English language proficiency. Nyasha explained,

Sometimes it's not because you don't know how to participate but sometimes it's because you don't know whether you are going to be articulate enough to say the things that you're thinking or what you want to ask or if people are really going to understand you.

Nyasha makes a clear point that it is not that she lacks ideas or contributions to the discussion, but that it can be intimidating to articulate those ideas if English is not one's first language or if one is speaking with a non-American accent.

If the classroom climate is not welcoming to non-U.S. based examples or perspectives, this could serve as another challenge to students. Tony experienced this,

I feel like sometimes we are neglected. I have a class where we're only six students, we're two international students and the professor, he doesn't give an open floor to everyone to participate...because he assumes that we are of the same...We have the same background, which is not the case. We feel sidelined because we're in a class and we're not given a chance to participate and to express our views on certain issues, because everything is based on U.S. standard and instead of giving us a [way to share our] background, he ignores us.

Tony's experience was shared by other participants who also found that although their faculty discussed having inclusive classrooms, they were not always interested in hearing perspectives on course topics from a different country context or worldview. This contradiction was also present in interacting with peers, as one participant described,

Like where I come from we live like a communal life. If you have an issue I see it as my own issue too... but this environment here seems more like an individualistic person, everybody wants an individual life, very competitive and that to me, because I see you as

my brother, sister I believe we should work together as a team, as a pact. Even though they encourage teamwork, but I see that everybody is going to go their own way.

This participant experienced dissonance in hearing that working together was an important value in the classroom and sharing that same value, but experiencing a climate that was instead competitive and individualistic. Contradictions such as these took time to figure out and navigate, which took time and energy away from participants' academic work. These experiences also made it difficult for participants to feel a sense of belonging and worth in their classroom spaces.

### **Discussion**

Many U.S. universities engage in major efforts to recruit international students, but engage less in strategies to ensure their academic and social adjustment. It is critical to invest in the success of African international graduate students, as they comprise a valuable component of the global talent pipeline (NAFSA Association of International Educators, 2006; National Science Board, 2014) and negative academic experiences can adversely affect their retention and achievement (Abe, Talbot, & Geehoeld, 1998, Author, 2015). Unfortunately, much of the literature on international students is focuses on coping, which leads to greater acculturative stress (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Conversely, our study investigates how universities position these students through implicit/explicit messages and resources that impact their ability for success.

This study first asks the question: How do African international graduate students experience the academic and social transition to college in the United States? Our findings demonstrate that this transition is heavily impacted by the way students are positioned by their campus due to their multiple social identities. Participants described feeling marginalized due to their race, ethnicity/nationality, foreign-status, and age. This aligns with extant scholarship that

demonstrates international students of Color experiencing stereotyping, neo-racism, and other forms of prejudice (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Hanassab, 2006; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2007). Participants seemed to experience the most cognitive dissonance about their racial positioning in the United States. This is likely because they moved from home countries where in being Black they were part of the racial majority to a country where they are in the racial minority. While the participants often questioned whether the ways they were treated by some faculty and students was due to one social identity or another, an intersectionality lens would explain that this treatment is due to their multiple identities and interlocked systems of oppression (Anthias, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Núñez, 2014).

The second research question asked: What is the role of campus structures and climate in the transition and success of African international graduate students in the United States? Unfortunately, participants described a campus climate that often negatively impacted their university experience. Multi-level intersectionality theory considers the societal arena that contributes to the student experience (Anthias, 2013; Núñez, 2014), which participants described predominantly as faculty and other peer interactions within classroom and social spaces. One dimension of this arena is intersubjective, or the relationships between individuals and members of groups. Within this study, how faculty and peers perceived the African graduate students due to factors such as accent/language differences as well as cultural differences often led to negative treatment or stereotypes. However, these perceptions are also impacted by the representational dimension, which stems from larger discursive processes. In this case, within the U.S., Africa is often portrayed one-dimensionally within the media and similarly goes unacknowledged or is presented with a limited view within the U.S. education system (Awokoya, 2012; Zeleza, 2009). U.S. society's representational narrative of Africa as a region of poverty and instability intersects

with the intersubjective arena to impact African graduate students experiencing education in the U.S. as paternalistic and prejudicial.

As an organizational structure, participants described the university setting as one that engaged in rhetoric around the importance of internationalization. U.S. colleges and universities engage in an internationalization mission by sending students abroad to study, recruiting international students and academics, and partnering with foreign universities to develop academic programs (Lane, 2011). Internationalization provides campuses with positive benefits including greater prestige and institutional reputation as well as financial profit (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). The enrollment of international students is a common method of internationalization in U.S. higher education. However, the actual practice of serving African graduate students as a part of that goal was lacking for this study's participants. Thus, while international graduate students can appear to support a campus' internationalization mission through structural enrollment numbers and provide labor through working in campus assistantships, this does not mean they will receive the support structures necessary for a successful transition. This experience parallels literature on Black American graduate students who positively represent diversity goals for their predominantly White campuses, but often describe a lack of resources and support to positively navigate their campus experience (Gasman et al., 2008; Gay, 2004; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Robinson, 2012).

The African participants described feeling underrepresented in comparison to other international student populations. The participants saw themselves as one of few or as the only African student in their classes and also did not see their home cultures, foods, or worldviews represented by the university. This seems to run counter to one of the main reasons universities give for enrolling international students, which is to improve campus cultural engagement and



diversity (NAFSA, 2006). However, the lack of prioritizing graduate students from the African region may be due to the financial role that international students play for universities. For example, international undergraduate students often provide a financial gain for U.S. universities due to predominantly paying for college out of pocket or because their home country's government pays for their tuition (Author, 2013). However, this is less likely for students coming from low-resource countries such as many of the participants within this study. Thus, universities may be less willing to prioritize their enrollment over international students from other areas of the world.

Participants within our study did not appear to internalize the negative messages and perceptions they received from campus members. Instead, they engaged in resistance through attempting to be successful in their studies despite the master narratives they encountered telling them that they were not capable or were lesser than their majority peers. This demonstrates a counter to the narrative of who these students are and what they can achieve. Participants also mobilized with other African international students to help meet housing, food, childcare, and other needs when their university did not. Yet, through their stories our findings demonstrate a counter to the scholarly narrative that international students are the only ones responsible for their campus experience (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Lee, 2007; Lee & Opio, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007) and instead call for greater accountability from universities for ensuring the success of these students.

### **Implications**

By focusing on international students from a specific region (sub-Saharan Africa) and education level (graduate studies), our study illustrates some of the nuanced experiences of this student population. We recommend that future researchers continue to disaggregate international student data in order to demonstrate the diversity of experiences, backgrounds, and contexts

within this group. Our findings also demonstrate how international students perceive themselves in relation to university priorities, particularly regarding campus internationalization. Scholars can further this finding by examining how universities are structuring their internationalization strategies, whether and how they are positioning international students within these strategies, and the resources provided to support the success of these students. Utilizing critical theories and perspectives that center on issues of power and equity would be useful tools for future empirical research in this area.

The students in our study demonstrate resilience, determination, and achievement in the face of complexities inherent in their U.S. educational experiences. However, the participants also believed that their university could do more to support their positive transition into and through graduate studies. Given the current racist and anti-globalist context of U.S. politics and policies, ensuring that international students feel belongingness at their universities is even more heightened. In the short term, universities should work to prepare students for the experiences that they encounter on their campuses and provide support to meet students' needs. However, it is unlikely that one office (e.g., international student services) can provide the support needed to achieve a smooth transition, particularly for African graduate students who can have multiple marginalized identities. Therefore, university departments will need to work together to ensure that the financial, logistical, and personal needs of these students are made a priority. For example, we suggest that offices such as international student services, counseling services, and multicultural affairs collaborate together to offer programs that support students who are grappling with racist nativist treatment in their classes. While an international student orientation program can begin to address this topic, it is not until students start to experience prejudice during the academic year that they may realize they need this support. Or some students may have these experiences, but not believe that they can or should seek support. Therefore, support,

resources, and programming must be on-going initiatives, not solely one-time offerings. We recommend that offices partner with current students/student organizations to develop culturally-sustaining practices that support students holistically. Furthermore, because the students in our study are graduate students, they were also more connected to their academic departments and so integrating academic affairs into strategies to reach these students is critical. This could include preparing students for the issues they may face as teaching assistants or research assistants, which were described by participants in our study.

Yet, it is important that institutions do not merely support students in how to cope with negative experiences. It is also important in the long-term for predominantly White institutions to improve their campus climate for international students of Color so that American faculty and students do not engage in behaviors that marginalize, oppress, and isolate them. For example, universities must recognize that sensitivity trainings, information about the financial hardships faced by international students, and other such initiatives can also serve to reify stereotypes about African students. Instead, universities should consider faculty/staff training and professional development that elucidates the prejudices and implicit biases that exist regarding African international students and other minoritized student populations. Another educational tool can be the use of the intersectionality framework to demonstrate how students' experiences are impacted by multiple systems of oppression that universities often reify. This creates a focus on improved individual self-awareness and change for faculty and staff as well as the need for institutional-level change to support students, rather than solely emphasizing how international students need "help" because they are "different" or the "other."

There are multiple opportunities for institutions to undertake the work of creating sustained positive climate for international students, ranging from timely and supportive responses to emails seeking assistance; educating campuses about the diversity and richness of

continents beyond Europe; and making it a priority to recruit, hire and retain international faculty and staff of Color as part of their campus internationalization plans. Furthermore, creating communities of practice amongst students and faculty of Color to share experiences, information and resources is effective, as is creating groups across race, class, and nationality to engage together in climate improvement programs. Campus climate goals should be integrated into universities' internationalization and diversity strategies in order to ensure the sustained success of international students.

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