

# **What Does Africa Have to Do with Being American?: U.S. African and European American College Students' Notions of, Knowledge of, and Experiences with Africa**

by

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## **Abstract**

The responses of 30 U.S. African and European American College Students' notions of, knowledge of, and experiences with Africa are explored and examined. Using symbolic interactionism, three focus groups and 30 in-depth interviews were obtained based on preliminary finds of students' understandings of the geography and terrain, and the circumstances and conditions of Africa. Via interviews, students demonstrated different understandings and perspectives about their experiences with Africa, primarily the impact of slavery in Africa, during The Middle Passage, and in the Americas - specifically slavery's contemporary impact on the lives of U.S. Americans. U.S. African American Students tended to feel strong socioemotional ties and connections to Africa, void of significant knowledge of Africa and experiences with continental African Peoples. U.S. European American Students tended to lack any significant socioemotional tie or connection to Africa or to U.S. African Americans, but possessed significantly more knowledge and familiarity with Africa and continental African Peoples.

U.S. African American Students also tended to empathize with the treatment and experiences of enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the Americas, however U.S. European American Students tended to sympathize with the brutality against enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the U.S., but did so with dissolution and abandonment. While all students decried the inhumanity and brutality of The Middle Passage, U.S. European American Students were unable to connect The Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S. to the contemporary feelings, circumstances, conditions, identities, and experiences of U.S. African Americans. I conclude with some suggestions about how all these students can connect with one another via interrogating their collective decry of The Middle Passage in ways that extend deeper understandings and explanations of how, and perhaps why, U.S. Africans Americans embrace and envision Africa as central to their sociocultural identities, everyday experiences, and hopes for the future (Ani 1994 & 2014, Asante 2015, Karenga 2010).

**Keywords:** U.S. African and European American Students, Responses, The Middle Passage, Slavery in the U.S.

## **Introduction**

Many displaced descendants of Africa (a.k.a. Peoples of the African Diaspora) routinely assert that they feel a strong socioemotional tie and connection to Africa (Magubane 1987; Manning 2009; Iton 2010). African and African American scholars have long asserted this tie and connection exists as a complex multi-layered form of Afrocentrism(s) and longings for Africa, void of any specific substantive knowledge about the histories, cultures, politics, and/or experiences of African Peoples in continental Africa (Ani 1994; Asante 1988 & 2014; Karenga 2010). These kinds of socioemotional ties and connections to Africa have continued to grow and develop, and manifest themselves among displaced descendants of Africa resulting in hybrid forms, and dual identities and personalities (Akbar 1979; Asante 1988; Bacon and McClish 2006; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous 1998). How, and perhaps why, might displaced descendants of Africa in a place like the U.S.A. (whom consider themselves African Americans) continue to yearn for, identify with, and appropriate Africa? What might these kinds of socioemotional expressions and identifications reveal about characteristics that have to do with being American? How might dominant populations of European Americans in places like the U.S.A. respond to the yearnings, identification with, and appropriation of Africa among those in their country whom consider themselves African Americans?

In this paper, the responses of 30 U.S. African and European American College Students' notions of, knowledge of, and experiences with Africa are explored and examined. Using symbolic interactionism, three focus groups and 30 in-depth interviews were obtained based on preliminary finds of students' understandings of the geography and terrain, and the circumstances and conditions of Africa.

Via interviews, students demonstrated different understandings and perspectives about their experiences with Africa, primarily the impact of slavery in Africa, during The Middle Passage, and in the Americas - specifically slavery's contemporary impact on the lives of U.S. Americans.

U.S. African American Students tended to feel strong socioemotional ties and connections to Africa, void of significant knowledge of Africa and experiences with continental African Peoples. U.S. European American Students tended to lack any significant socioemotional tie or connection to Africa or to U.S. African Americans, but possessed significantly more knowledge and familiarity with Africa and continental African Peoples. U.S. African American Students also tended to empathize with the treatment and experiences of enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the Americas, however U.S. European American Students tended to sympathize with the brutality against enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the U.S., but did so with dissolution and abandonment.

While all students decried the inhumanity and brutality of The Middle Passage, U.S. European American Students were unable to connect The Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S. to the contemporary feelings, circumstances, conditions, identities, and experiences of U.S. African Americans. I conclude with some suggestions about how all these students can connect with one another via interrogating their collective decry of The Middle Passage in ways that extend deeper understandings and explanations of how, and perhaps why, U.S. Africans Americans embrace and envision Africa as central to their sociocultural identities, everyday experiences, and hopes for the future (Ani 1994 & 2014, Asante 2015, Karenga 2010).

## **Literature Review**

Normative U.S. educational discourse at all levels has perpetuate negative stereotypes and prejudice for Africa and against African Peoples (Harper 2012; Hershey and Artime 2014). These negative stereotypes and prejudice outline a premise erect on the internalization of racial and ethnic bias manifest in the pervasive constructions of hegemonic dialogue rooted in a mixture of white privilege and classism as merited forms of racial, ethnic, and social class entitlement (Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2013; Carolissen and Bozalek 2017). Mainstream U.S. Schools then, overtly and covertly, attack the self-esteem, self-confidence, and social identities of non-dominant racial and ethnic minorities; in most cases Africans and African American Students. Students' perceptions of Africa and African Peoples reflect educational institutional biases and prejudice; students' expressions reveal blatant imagery and descriptive depictions of wild, untamed Africa, which is full of animals, witch doctors, and wicked women and warrior beasts (Beyer and Hicks 1970; Myers 2001).

Students' perceptions of Africa and African Peoples are influenced by the views of their parents, novels and popular magazines, news stories, TV shows and movies that are often linked to the accounts of missionaries and explorers/travelers whom stress the wild and exotic (Hershey and Artime 2014). Unfortunately, students' embrace of biased media presentations and representations of Africa and African Peoples is supported via their curriculum and school experiences; students' cognitive constructions are grounded on ill-conceptualizations provided by teachers, texts/readings, and the comprehensive curricular materials (Kelly 1971; Osunde, Tlou, and Brown 1996). Students' knowledge then, is processed as beliefs linked to importance, value, and socioemotional connections to Africa and African Peoples (Kim 2017). Africa and African descendants are assumed then to lack the agency, autonomy, and sociomoral responsibility for their upwards social mobility; in like manner, Africa and African Peoples become manifestations of the unbridled post-independence African liberation era where widespread continental violence, destruction, chaos, poverty, and disease have increase (Hershey and Artime 2014).

According to Beyer and Hicks (1970) and Osunde, Tlou, and Brown (1996), much of the persistent stereotypes about Africa in U.S. Students' knowledge about Africa and African Peoples comes from ill-conceived perceptions and misinterpretations of their parents, peers, and school educators concerning notions about 'the primitive, backwards, underdevelopment of hot strange lands of jungles and deserts populated with wild animals' namely elephants, lions and tigers, snakes, and black-skinned naked savage cannibals and Pygmy Peoples ("Tigers being bred in Gauteng backyards for petting and bone export" 2018; "Why Don't Tigers Live in Africa?" 2010). Harushimana and Awokoya (2011) assert contemporary African diasporic communities in places like the U.S. have facilitate educator's embrace of multicultural curriculums and modes of instruction that advocate for and endorse distinctive African and diverse and complex migrant African groups. They also declare the current demographic representation of African populations, which overwhelmingly suppresses Africans' voices, have promote the salience of multicultural educational perspectives and experiences have recognize distinct African histories and cultures in both the East and the West that are important valuable aspects for understanding how to advance and develop Africa and the world.

Similar to Harushimana and Awokoya (2011), Zhao, Lin, and Hoge (2007) propose that students need to develop a global perspective and be more knowledgeable about other nations in the world in order to play a better role on a global stage. Zhao, Lin, and Hoge (2007) say contemporary assessments of students' needs must consider multinational global knowledge paired with practical sociocultural experiences of other nation's national histories, politics and policies, and domestic economics and international trade and labor relations. Other researchers have assert outright educational resistance to whiteness and elitist classism, which is embraced and espoused in the mainstream U.S. Media.

U.S. Schools have played an important role in spurring the creation and development of Afrocentric worldviews that are currently being taught as Afrocentricities in U.S. African American Community Schools (Asante 1988; Magubane 1987). Afrocentricities yield great insight and understanding into how, and perhaps why, Africa and African Peoples might continue to play a central role in the social resilience and the cultural resistance and re-development of hybrid identities of U.S. African Americans (Akbar 1984; Schiele 1994).

Many narrow-minded racists have espouse colorblind ethno-Eurocentric rhetoric and perspectives that draw on negative portrayals of Africa and African Peoples that betray and undermine the value and importance of Africa and African Peoples in the advancement and development of European Societies and the world (Achebe 2016; Fabian 2000; Rodney 1972; Marable 2015). The propagation of such ill- conceived notions and politically purposeful misrepresentations of the histories, cultures, and politics of Africa and particular groups of African Peoples is characteristic of the contemporary operation of colorblind institutional forms of racism. Diverse institutional forms of racism continue to be imposed on to Africa, continental African Peoples, and U.S. African Americans today who are victims of the involuntary forced that is central to the African Diaspora (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Caplan 2008; Jordan 1968; Manning 2009; Marable 2015).

Complex forms of racism and ethno-Eurocentrism manifest in the lack of interracial and interethnic contact and interaction among U.S. African and European American Peoples today, particularly among these college student populations (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Brunsma, Brown, and Placier 2013; Stearns, Buchmann, and Bonneau 2009). This lack of sociocultural contact and interaction is reminiscent of the historic racial and ethnic segregation on many U.S. Campuses that still plagues mainstream U.S. institutions of higher education. Racial macro and microaggressions against Africans and people of African descent on U.S. College Campuses have not deter the flow and growth of black American students into these predominately white European American institutions of higher learning (Harushimana and Awokoya 2011; Stebleton and Aleixo 2016). Researchers have found that Africans and descendants of Africa on U.S. College Campuses quickly become aware, via everyday social interaction with predominately white U.S. European American Students, of their race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, nationalities, and social identities, which play an important role in these student's self-perceptions, senses of belonging, social advancement, ability to assimilate, and integrative construction of complex hybrid educational identities (Harper 2012; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000).

## Research Methodology and Methods

All 30 U.S. African and European American College Students' responses were explored and examined based on their notions of, knowledge of, and experiences with Africa. This was based on students':

- 1) actions as a basis for the meanings they ascribe to Africa, The Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S., and
- 2) the meanings these students derived from, and arose out of, the social interaction they had with others in U.S. Society that was modified through their interpretative processes (Blumer 1969).

Participants were gathered using a non-threatening, non-invasive, research approach that minimized the researcher's rank, status, and institutional position at the host university where the snowball population sample was derived. As a service-oriented researcher and academic advisor to two student-run organizations on campus, students were observed silently. As a faculty organizational advisor whom routinely attended all of the weekly meetings, much of the considerations of student's chit-chat conversations and discussions were revealing. Specifically, students' notions and perceptions, knowledge of, and experiences with racial and ethnic majority and minoritized groups on campus (Stewart 2013). Specific discussions and conversations about Africa were often linked to other comments and responses about U.S. African American Peoples. Based on students' conversations and discussion, which arose from a mixture of their formal and informal social group discussion questions and queries about reaching out and connecting with other student social groups and organizations on campus, an IRB applications was submitted and then approved.

After the IRB Committee was approved, students were sought out and obtained. Consent was also given from students (specifically for the student organization's leadership committee members) about participating in a study of notions and perceptions, knowledge and experiences with Africa. Advancing interests in students' responses yielded the setting up of informal focus groups, and then by conducting 30 one-on-one in-depth interviews. Students' responses were highly confidential; students were also asked for permission to use their information but to provide a pseudonym if I were to use their responses in a research paper. With consent, three slightly racially and ethnically mixed focus groups comprised approximately 15 students in each group were obtained. 30 in-depth interviews in: 1) my office, 2) the university's student lounge, and 3) one of the large common areas in a large study room in one of the large dormitories at the university is where focus group and in-depth interviews were obtained (See Appendix for focus group and one-on-one in-depth interview questions).

## Research Participants

My participants comprised 30 U.S. African and European American College Students from a small Midwestern University. To ensure students' confidentiality, I changed their names but kept their sex, race & ethnicity, age, academic status & majors, and hometown origins the same (See Table 1).

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the College Students (N-30)**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Academic Status</b>	<b>Academic Major</b>	<b>Hometown</b>
Ashley Wett	Female	AF-AM	21	Senior	Communications	East Cleveland, Ohio
Katie Sully	Female	EU-AM	19	Sophomore	Soci & Crim	Westlake, Ohio
Cathy Lobe	Female	EU-AM	21	Senior	Psychology	University Heights, Ohio
Charlie Hedge	Male	EU-AM	19	Sophomore	Marketing	Eastlake, Ohio
Daryl Mason	Male	AF-AM	21	Senior	Poli-Sci	East Cleveland, Ohio
Manny Braun	Male	AF-AM	20	Junior	Wn & Gend Stds	Warrensville, Ohio
John Zim	Male	EU-AM	21	Senior	History	Beachwood, Ohio
Kristina Carr	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Bio/ Pre-Med	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Laurie Matton	Female	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Thelma Manu	Female	EU-AM	20	Junior	Soci & Crim	University Heights, Ohio
Mary Billson	Female	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Art History	Shaker Heights, Ohio
Quin Noah	Male	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Mary Jepps	Female	EU-AM	20	Senior	Bio/Pre-Med	Jefferson, Ohio
Sarah Lawton	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Rebecca Mola	Female	AF-AM	20	Junior	Poli-Sci	East Cleveland, Ohio
Carol Schill	Female	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	University Heights, Ohio
Asia Jamil	Female	AF-AM	20	Junior	Comp Sci	Akron, Ohio
Folly Samps	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Psychology	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Clay Fonk	Male	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Soci & Crim	Akron, Ohio
Amy Franks	Female	EU-AM	19	Sophomore	Wn &Gend Stds	University Heights, Ohio
Patricia Gaunt	Female	EU-AM	21	Senior	Soci & Crim	University Heights, Ohio
Lara Cadam	Female	EU-AM	21	Senior	Psychology	Rocky River, Ohio
Raquel Follo	Female	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	Shaker Heights, Ohio
Mara Whitey	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Bio/ Pre-Med	Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Damion Black	Male	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	East Cleveland, Ohio
Charles Brow	Male	EU-AM	21	Senior	Soci & Crim	University Heights, Ohio
Kendra Battle	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Psychology	Cleveland, Ohio
Maya Bard	Female	AF-AM	18	Freshman	Undecided	East Cleveland, Ohio
Ken Mandy	Male	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Soci & Crim	Solon, Ohio
Solomon Park	Male	EU-AM	18	Freshman	Sports Studies	Westlake, Ohio

\*AF-AM = Black/African American; EU-AM = White/European American

## **Findings**

All students expressed common superficial notions and perceptions, and held similar surface-level knowledge of the geography and terrain, and circumstances and conditions of Africa, but had different socioemotional responses and interpretative experiences of Africa. Students also had different understandings and expressed different perspectives about their experiences with African Peoples, which were primarily related to the impact of slavery in Africa post-European contact, on The Middle Passage, and in the Americas, specifically on the lives of U.S. African Americans.

U.S. African American Students demonstrated strong socioemotional ties and connections with Africa, void of specific knowledge of Africa. U.S. European American Students lacked any kind of significant socioemotional ties or connections with Africa and with U.S. African Americans, but possessed significantly more knowledge and familiarity with continental Africa and African Peoples. U.S. African American Students also tended to empathize with the treatment and experiences of enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the U.S., but U.S. European American Students tended to sympathize with the brutality against enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and with slavery in the U.S., but did so with dissolution and abandonment.

All students decried the inhumanity and brutality of The Middle Passage, however, U.S. European American Students were unable to connect The Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S. to the contemporary feelings, circumstances, conditions, identities, and experiences of U.S. African Americans. Let me show and then discuss student's common notions of, perceptions of, and experiences with Africa in greater detail.

### **I. Notions and Perceptions of Africa**

To illustrate the similarities among students, their response was categorically placed adjacent to one another. First are the responses of U.S. African American Students with a brief analysis and discussion. After that, the responses of U.S. European American Students are analyzed and discussed, and then related to the U.S. African American Students' responses.

#### **African American Students' Responses**

I have encountered a ton of societal images and messages about Africa. Essentially, lies about the people and various cultures... all the piles of brochures in the mail about donating to the starving children in Africa. When I turn on the television, it's sad images of underdeveloped villages with church groups looking to collect donations. The media has played a huge role in my perception of Africa, specifically films like *Coming to America*, *Hotel Rwanda*, and *Blood Diamond* to name a few.



I still have trouble believing Africa is a beautiful place and not an impoverished war driven wasteland. All those images of ‘uncivilized’ black bodies have had such a huge impact on how and what I have come to think about Africa.

(Daryl Mason, a 21-year-old, African American Male, Senior, Political Science Major from East Cleveland, Ohio)

I used to have a few preconceived notions regarding Africa, its citizens, way of life, and culture. Television programs and commercials would always portray Africa as a place of like, no civilization. A place that was very behind in technology. There were no built houses, but just straw huts and fires outside of them for cooking and warming up. The people were wearing little clothing that is always a particular brown color. All of the people of the continent were black, most of which had particularly dark skin. I outgrew these notions as I got older and was exposed to the real Africa, and more black people. Africa, actually, has roads, large developed buildings, lights, cars, etc. The inhabitants, in fact, do not always live in extreme poverty or in a tribal sort of nomadic way as is portrayed in the media.

(Rebecca Mola, a 20-year-old, African American Female, Junior, Political Science Major from Cleveland, Ohio)

Both U.S. African American Students’ responses point to the role and influence of the media, which has given them negative, biased images and perceptions. For Daryl, church groups play a significant part in the negative propagation of Africa as an impoverished land. Both students, however, assert the media has misrepresented Africa’ consequently resulting in the way they feel about themselves as descendants of Africa. For Daryl, the images and messages about Africa are fundamental lies, and for Rebecca they are incomplete, purposefully biased depictions that are still troublesome to her, chiefly because they resonate in her perpetual negative conceptualizations of Africa and her identity as a descendent of Africa. Let me show U.S. European American Students’ notions and perceptions, and then analyze, discuss, and relate them to U.S. African American Students’ responses.

### **European American Students’ Responses**

Growing up, the images that came to my head whenever I thought of Africa were always negative – children starving, people drinking polluted water, armed conflict, etc... I had a friend from Senegal who told me a lot about Wolof culture. I remember that one time she showed me pictures of her nice house in Dakar and when I was surprised, she got irritated and said, “You know, Amy, not everyone in Africa is starving to death.” So much of the news about Africa is tainted with the bad things that happen there that I would forget that normal life also goes on too. Many notions have been formed mostly by mass media and my church.

I have been taught to look down on Africa for being a third world country that is filled with savage barbarian people who have no technology, no schooling, and is full of disease, war, fighting, crime, and overall danger. I know this is not true, but that doesn't mean these aren't still the notions I feel that are still pushed by media today. At my Catholic Church, Africa is equated with ignorance, and that the people of Africa do not know how to fix their problems or to speak for themselves so we must come in and teach them about Christianity and westernize the continent. There are small snippets of Uganda I heard about, and the need to donate, Kony 2012, statistics about AIDs, and FGM in Africa. What has been taught to me by media in the musical *The Book of Mormon*, which displays Africans as clueless angry people who believe that sex with frogs will cure their AIDS. I know this musical is supposed to be a joke at Mormon beliefs and the ignorance Americans have about Africa, but if someone does not pull the layers back to understand that meaning, they may actually believe it.

(Amy Franks, a 19-year-old, European American Female, Sophomore, Women & Gender Studies Major from University Heights, Ohio)

When thinking about Africa I immediately think about an impoverished undeveloped country. I think of how they have little to no technology, and small markets and places that have no structure, like shacks made of scrap wood. When it comes to religion in Africa I think of music that has lots of drums and chanting. Religion in Africa to me seems like it may focus on spirits more than believing in one god. I also think about African dress in which they wear head wraps and colorful robes that often match the head wrap. I learned relatively nothing about Africa over the course of my education, so all of my notions of Africa are that it is an unindustrialized country with little to no technology that is made up of impoverished tribal communities. Also, the wildlife there. I watch a lot of wildlife documentaries. In the anthropology class I took my sophomore year I remember seeing a documentary that followed a very small tribe in Africa that was impoverished, and they killed a giraffe for meat to sell and consume since it is rare meat. When I think about Africa though, I think about these tribal communities and a dry landscape that makes it hard to survive. Now that I think about it, the only way I have seen Africa is through pictures of mission trips and UNICEF commercials.

(Patricia Gaunt, a 21-year-old, European American Female, Senior, Sociology & Criminology Major from University Heights, Ohio)

In geography class, I remember my teacher skipped the entire continent of Africa in order to prepare for the end of the year testing. In World History, African was left out, and in my U.S. History class we only spent one day on the slave trade talking about economics and politics. The majority of my ideas comes from movie depictions like *Django Unchained*, *Gone With The Wind*, and *Band of Angels*. I am ashamed to admit that...

(Katie Sully, a 19-year-old, European American Female, Sophomore, Sociology & Criminology Major from Westlake, Ohio)

The U.S. European American Students' responses point to the role and influence of the media, the church, and social service groups, which paints a negative, biased perception and portrait of underdevelopment, poverty, and lack of technology in Africa. Although Amy asserts she knows this portrait is not true, she says "that doesn't mean these aren't still the notions I feel." In like manner, Patricia says that impoverished, underdevelopment, and little to no technology comes to mind when she thinks of Africa. Kate says Hollywood depictions gave her ideas and images of Africa, which she is ashamed to admit. Similar to U.S. African American Students' responses, the U.S. European American Students say the mass media, particularly movies, play a significant role in the social construction and development of their notions and perceptions of Africa. Let me show and discuss students' knowledge of Africa.

## **II. Knowledge of Africa**

To illustrate the similarities among students, their responses was categorically placed adjacent to one another. First are the responses of U.S. African American Students with a brief analysis and discussion. After that, the responses of U.S. European American Students are analyzed, discussed, and then related to the U.S. African American Students' responses.

### **African American Students' Responses**

I do not know much. It was not taught to me. They only taught us about Africa when we talked about the slave trade and slavery in America. We talked about animals and geography in Africa more than we talked about the people.

(Ashley Wett, a 21-year-old, African American Female, Senior Communication Major from East Cleveland, Ohio)

I do not know too much. I have family and friends from Uganda and Kenya, so I probably knew more than the average student, but still not as much as I would like. I could tell you the names of many of the African countries, perhaps even all of them once, but if you tried to ask me about the culture or politics of these countries I would be clueless.

(Quin Noah, a 18 year old, African American Male, Freshman, undecided major from Cleveland Heights, Ohio)

When I think of Africa, I think of my ancestors, slavery, rituals, animals, etc. I never took an African American course... I truly want to learn more about my history. I do not know much - I know general facts. Africa is the second largest continent. There are 54 countries. There are also many different languages spoken. Sudan is the largest country. The Nile River is the longest river in the world. The world's largest desert is the Sahara.

The African elephant is the world's largest land animal. The world's tallest animal is the giraffe, which lives in Africa. With regards to the population of Africa, there is a diverse population made up of different tribes and groups. There are thousands of tribes and groups in Africa. Some of the tribes I am familiar with are Arab, Kongo, and Zulu. I do not know much about these tribes, I just have heard of them. The second largest religion in Africa is Islam. My grandparents practice Islam so I am familiar with the religion. (Asia Jamil, a 20-year-old, African American Female, Junior, Computer Science Major from Akron, Ohio)

All U.S. African American Students' responses point to the absent educational role and influence of teachers in adequately describing and discussing the most superficial aspects of Africa. At best, Asia says she has broad knowledge of facts; similar to Asia, Ashley says that "we talked about animals and geography in Africa more than we talked about the people," which has left her with a sense of longing, which is intertwined with a lack of knowledge and sense of belonging. Quin, however, admits at one point that he could recite many names of African countries and capitals, but has forgotten them. More so, Quin's knowledge of Africa, despite the family and friends he has whom are from Uganda and Kenya, has left him clueless about the culture or politics of any particular African countries. Even though Quin openly admits this, he still believes he knows more than the average student, which is telling of the significant absence of Africa in U.S. American Education. Let me show U.S. European American Students' knowledge of Africa, and then analyze, discuss, and relate this to U.S. African American Students' responses.

### **European American Students' Responses**

I have all the countries and capitals memorized, and learned a brief history of a few African countries... I want to study abroad somewhere in Africa. Most people think Africa doesn't have history or civilizations, or anything worth studying, but that is wrong. It is a very diverse continent filled with different ways of life. Some people are so ignorant on African history that they believe Africa is a single country. I learned about FGM, the white savior industrial complex by Teju Cole, and I studied Rwanda's booming economy. Nelson Mandela had not even seen lions, or giraffes or the things people associate Africa with until he left his country of South Africa in his later life... Some ancient empires I know about are the Igbo and the Oyo. The Igbo where present day Nigeria is, and the Oyo in the present day Libya area. {The Oyo Empire did not extend to contemporary Libya (Afigbo and Palmer 1986; Akinjogbin 1966; De Villiers 1997)} In the Northern part of Africa the most populous cities lie on the coast because of the access to water and for trading purposes. The middle of the continent is covered in lush, dense rainforests.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is so dense that when Europeans decided to carve up Africa, they could not even get into the DRC. South Africa has much lower temperatures than Northern African countries. African geography goes from dry desert up north, to lush rainforests, to deserts and grasslands.

(Laurie Matton, a 18-year-old, European American Female, undecided major from Cleveland Heights, Ohio)

Most of my knowledge of Africa (particularly of the country of Nigeria) comes from *Things Fall Apart*, where I learned about how organized and complex Igbo culture was, and the devastating impact of British colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* taught me that Africa has just as much culture and beauty as any other continent. That book and others taught me about the richness of African languages, songs, and dances. In school, I also learned about some of the wealthy pre-colonial civilizations and empires, like the Mali Empire. I know some things about the Maasai people of Kenya and their customs from my high school geography class. I also know a bit about the native people of Namibia and their traditional homes, and attire and diet. I know that they use butter on their skin to protect it from the sun, which is interesting.

(Raquel Follo, a 18-year-old, European American Female, Freshman undecided major from Shaker Heights, Ohio)

Most of my knowledge regarding Africa is from a more ancient period. The Egyptian empire is mostly what I retained from the Pan-African studies class. I was taught about the pyramids, the advancement of pharaohs, the advancement of the Egyptian civilizations, and the Egyptian religion. The instructor also touched on how fertile the land was and how it was able to sustain life in such an inhospitable region. The Nile was a very important part of Egyptian life and culture. I also learned about the Moors and how they contributed to education in Europe and Africa as well. As far as religion in Africa, I learned that in later history, the majority of northern Africans were Muslim. This was of course before European conquests and the religion wars. Also, in my previous history classes, a lot of emphasis was put on the Europeans conquering many African regions and exploiting the resources for trade in other economic regions.

(John Zim, a 21-year-old, European American Male, Senior, History Major from Beachwood, Ohio)

U.S. European American Students' responses demonstrate more knowledge, attention to detail, and retention of information about particular groups of African Peoples. These students' responses also reveal their digestion, integration, and confident expressions of knowledge of Africa. Their integration of knowledge, unlike African American Students, is expressed in their warding off what they believe are stereotypical notions, perspectives, and over-simplistic racist views of Africa.

Unlike Ashley who suggests that nothing substantive about the people of Africa was ever taught to her except for the European slave trade and slavery in America, Laurie says that she has memorized all the countries and capitals, wants to study abroad somewhere in Africa, and is familiar with specific histories and civilizations. Unlike Asia's list of general facts about Africa, Laurie, Raquel, and John express details about specific African empires pre-European contact. John, in particular, provides a broad scope of his knowledge of Africa, which is inclusive of African Empires, Advancements, Cultures, and Religions. The U.S. European American Students, unlike the U.S. African American Students, explicitly talk about Europeans' contact with Africa in ways indicative of Europeans' decision to colonize and carve up Africa (Laurie), the wealth of pre-colonial civilizations and empires and the devastating impact of British colonialism (Raquel), and Europeans' conquests of African regions and exploitation of African resources for trade and other socio-economic gains in the region (John). Let me show and then discuss students' socioemotional ties and connections to Africa via The Middle Passage and slavery in the Americas.

### **III. Socioemotional Ties and Connections to Africa via The Middle Passage**

To illustrate the similarities and differences among students, their responses are categorically placed adjacent to one another. First the responses of U.S. African American Students are analyzed and discussed. After that the responses of U.S. European American Students are analyzed, discussed, and then related to the U.S. African American Students' responses.

#### **African American Students' Responses**

Those captive survived by the grace of God. I can only imagine the high levels of dehydration and starvation. I often try to place myself in their shoes and ask myself "could you be strong enough to last this journey?" 9 times out of 10 my answer is no. My level of the treatment. Forced to lay in their own and other's body fluids. If I had to place myself on a slave ship, I don't think I could do it. Treated like animals - I will always I have a problem with that. Auctioned off and put to work. Striped given a European name and treated as property. No longer a person, but an object. I don't think I could handle it. I am a very strong-willed individual, but they erased families, cultures, legacies. If I were in their shoes, I would not have made it. The diseases and exhaustion - I couldn't have handle it.

(Manny Braun, a 20-year-old, African American Male, Junior, Women & Gender Studies Major from Warrensville, Ohio)

I try to place myself in their shoes and try to image how it felt to go through everything they experienced. Being taken away from your home to be used and mistreated. I can only imagine the pain. The fear of dying. I feel their pain, but also respect how strong they were to have survived.

There's still a lot of turmoil and corruption in many African governments that is a product of racial and ethnic conflict and apartheid, which is their version Jim Crow and segregation. In South Africa apartheid, ended in 1993 and racial segregation ended in the U.S. ended in the 1970's. There are still many issues of institutionalized racism in Africa, just like we have it here today in the US.

(Maya Bard, an 18-year-old, African American Female, Freshman, undecided major from Cleveland, Ohio)

Although we can study the history of the treatment of slaves, there is no sure way of really knowing what it felt like to be a slave. We will never really know the tragedies that slaves faced on the slave ships and the plantations in America. European settlers in North America used race to justify the cruel inhumane treatment of African people forced into slavery. Many people do not see the significance in this fact about slavery in North America. European people thought that African people were not human. This meant that any laws for human rights did not apply to African people. Sins against Africans were also not actually sins, considering the beliefs in place about Africans not being human. Killing a slave did not condemn you to hell, nor did it send you to jail. Raping a slave woman or child was not pedophilia or adultery.... The racism was so devastating, and still is today in Africa and in America. Nelson Mandela helped free South Africa from apartheid, and he eventually became the first democratically elected president. Bishop Desmond Tutu also fought against apartheid and he won the Noble Peace Prize for it. This is stuff that everyone should know about, about how significant Africa is.

(Ashley Wett, a 21-year-old, African American Female, Senior Communication Major from East Cleveland, Ohio)

All U.S. African American Students' responses address the circumstance and conditions of enslaved Africans. Both Manny and Maya express empathy via 'putting themselves in the shoes of enslaved Africans on The Middle Passage.' Maya, however, advances her discussion of the contemporary turmoil and corruption that exists and persists in many African governments as a byproduct of racial and ethnic conflict and apartheid that she proposes is Africa's version of Jim Crow segregation. Maya introduces similarities of the circumstances and conditions of Africans in Africa with those of African Americans in the U.S via institutional racism. According to Maya, the effects of racism are significant on Africa, continental Africans, and African Americans in the U.S., which socioemotionally and socioeconomically ties and interconnects the three together as a past and present experience of African Peoples.

Ashley tells about the difficulties she has with empathizing with The Middle Passage and slavery in the Americas. She, however, delves deep into the dehumanizing European logic needed for the treatment of African Peoples in the Americas. While Manny and Maya express empathy for the enslaved Africans on a personal level, they do so by engaging in discussions about the social destruction of enslaved Africans using structural analyses and explanations.

Manny describes the auctioning off, stripping of Africans' identities, the giving of a European name, the treatment as property, and the erasure of families, cultures, legacies. Maya identifies with the enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage, saying that she feels their pain but also respects how strong they were to have survived, which indicates their socio-structural resistance, resiliency, and accomplishment.

Ashley conceptualizes the cruel inhumane treatment of African people forced into slavery by considering the circumstance and conditions of Africans in the Americas. After arguing the invasion and dissolving of human rights and religious hypocrisy, she expresses the significance of race and racism in the inhumane treatment of Africans in the Americas. Ashley does so by making socioemotional ties and connections to contemporary racism in Africa and in America via describing the struggles of Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu against apartheid. Ashley concludes with statements directly related to the socioemotional and socioeconomic tie and connect she feels with Africa, stating that everyone should know about the significance of Africa. Let me show U.S. European American Students' responses that indicate a lack of socioemotional ties and/or connections to Africa and The Middle Passage, and then analyze, discuss, and relate them to U.S. African American Students' responses.

### **European American Students' Responses**

I grew up in a predominantly white, homogenous town, so I did not have many notions of African Americans' experiences. In school I learned a little about slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, the Civil Rights movement, and I also read books like *Gone with the Wind*. I also watched *Twelve Years a Slave*. I know that African Americans had had a very difficult history in the U.S., but I had little empathy. I was exposed to so little racial division growing up. To be honest, it was not something I thought about much at all. I understood that African Americans are a disadvantaged minority, but I did not think much about why this is the case... I have begun to see how racial tension does still exist, and how the daily life experience of an African American truly is quite different from that of a white American.

(Thelma Manu, a 20-year-old, European American Female, Junior, Sociology & Criminology Major from University Heights, Ohio)

Being an 18-year-old white female in the United States, it is difficult for me to put myself in the shoes of African Americans. I can see all of the news headlines and hear all of the stories, but at the end of the day, I cannot speak on behalf of African Americans. With that being said, my notion of African Americans experience in the U.S. is that there are lasting effects of lifestyles that were created hundreds of years ago. I do believe that time heals many things though. I believe that African Americans are still treated unequally in many situations; inequalities are often overlooked or excuses are given to make them look not as intense.



African Americans face adversity every day that I could not imagine facing. However, every day I choose to be optimistic about life and I believe that great change can and will occur. I have a great amount of respect for African Americans that face degrading situations without fueling hate or violence because of waking up every day not knowing what disrespectful situation lies ahead.

(Carol Schill, a 18-year-old, European American Female, Freshman, undecided major from University Heights, Ohio)

To be taken as a slave must have been absolutely terrifying - put on a ship where they are maltreated, malnourished, and sexually abused. Imagining these atrocities coupled with the language barrier leaves chills on my arms and a feeling of horror in my stomach. Were I to be in this situation, I would most fear sexual assault, as I am considered a young attractive female. I am constantly on guard, as women must be, but in this situation, there was no way to avoid assault without the penalty of death.

(Kristina Carr, a 18-year-old, European American Female, Freshman, Bio/Pre-Med Major, from Cleveland Heights, Ohio)

The U.S. European American Students' responses demonstrate sympathy for the enslaved Africans; however, their understanding of how these experiences relate to the contemporary circumstance and conditions of U.S. African Americans' experiences is gloomy. Thelma says she had little empathy because she was exposed to so little racial division growing up. Thema also says honestly that the experiences of U.S. African Americans were not something she had ever thought much about but is now more aware of racial tension and how the everyday life experiences of U.S. African Americans are truly quite different from U.S. European Americans.

In like manner, Carol says that, being a white female, it is difficult for her to put herself in the shoes of U.S. African Americans and that she cannot speak for U.S. African Americans although she sees all of the news headlines and hears all of the stories of U.S. African Americans' struggles. On a positive note, indicative of her privileged racial position and cognition, Carol says U.S. African American lifestyles are the result of such oppressive circumstance and condition, but that time can heal many of U.S. African Americans' problems and issues. Her choice to be optimistic about life and her belief that great change can and will occur is also linked to her privileged contemporary racial position and mentality in the face of the perpetual macro and micro socio-structural aggressions that routinely erode the self-esteem, self-confidence, and African Identities of U.S. African Americans.

Although Kristina is aware of the circumstances and conditions of enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage, her focus is towards her white American female identity, which she is unable to shed. Without considering the inherent social privilege, status, and location of this identity, Kristina approaches sexual assault and abuse of African Peoples through a racialized lens rooted in her individual and societal European American contemporary perceptions of beauty.

Kristina says she would most fear ‘sexual assault, as I am considered a young attractive female,’ indicative of her Eurocentric American notions of beauty. Her inability to focus on the inhumane treatment of African Peoples primarily due to their skin color is questionable, specifically her contemplation of the assumed rights and privileges of womanhood denied to African Women during The Middle Passage and in the early Colonial American Era. Kristina’s self-assertion as a woman that must constantly be on guard for the sexual advances of ship captains and/or crewmen is inextricably embedded in her contemporary thinking of her privileged racial, sex and gendered positions, self-perceptions, and mentality. Should Kristine rebuff the sexual advances of a ship captain or crewmen, she asserts there is “no way to avoid assault without the penalty of death,” void of considering the fact that African Women routinely did so risking the penalty of death for the sake of their dignity and humanity.

Unlike the U.S. African American Students’ responses that demonstrated empathy, the U.S. European American Students’ responses expressed, described, and discussed sympathy in ways void of deep personal attachments and connections. While the U.S. African American Students were able to put themselves in the shoes of enslaved Africans during The Middle Passage and in the Americas, and to make a connection to the historical and contemporary turmoil and corruption in Africa and in U.S. African American communities, U.S. European American Students were not. U.S. African American Students clearly expressed how racism and ethnic conflict played a significant historical and contemporary role in the circumstances and conditions of African Peoples inside and outside of Africa, citing the relationships between African Apartheid, Jim Crow segregation, and institutional racism. U.S. European American Students, however, were unable to imagine themselves under such historical and contemporary circumstances and conditions due to lack of understanding of how race and racism has continued to occur in different forms that have been sustained over time and location.

On a structural level, U.S. African American Students were able to make transcontinental socioemotional ties and connections to Africa; however, U.S. European American Students were suddenly beginning to process race, racial tension, and the daily life struggles that comprise the experiences of U.S. African Americans when prompted to do so. U.S. European American Students also tended to identify individual-level acts of racial aggression and degrading situations, but did so with hope, optimism, and the belief that great change can and would occur in the future. Let me describe and discuss some of the similarities and difference between these groups of students in relation to the three categorical aforementioned findings and analysis.

## Discussion

The responses of all students regarding their superficial notions and perceptions of Africa was relatively similar, much of which was based on the mass media and the church. Both the mass media and church project similar images via TV advertisements soliciting funds, Hollywood villainy, and print texts, which are negative, purposefully biased, and comprehensively inaccurate. In overt and covert ways, Africa and its descendants are projected as impoverished, underdeveloped, lacking technology, untamed, uncivilized, and in need of western civility and Christianity. In spite of these kinds of images and depictions, U.S. African Americans routinely demonstrate various forms of Afrocentricity to counteract and develop a counternarrative of the strength and resilience of African Peoples of whom they are descendants. These counternarrative directly speak about their lives, identities, and social experiences in the U.S. These Afrocentricities also provide them with structural ways of re-envisioning their place in the Americas rooted in racial violence, domination, and exploitative control akin to the circumstance and conditions of Africans in Africa post European contact.

All the students' responses to knowledge of Africa are also relatively similar, almost all of which originated from teachers during their formal education in U.S. Schools. Their knowledge, however, is based on the instruction that they received (or lack thereof), most of which was expressed in dissimilar ways in accordance to their recollections. U.S. African American Students generally possessed fleeting knowledge of sporadic facts and events about Africa based on their memorization of national capitals, countries, and the geography and terrain, void of substantive knowledge of particular groups of people, governments, or politics that comprise different regional and local cultures and communities. U.S. European American Students demonstrate much more substantive integrated knowledge of, attention to, and retention of details about particular groups of African Peoples.

U.S. European American Students tended to demonstrate a greater possession and expression of knowledge; their knowledge was also more integrated into schemas of learning, understanding, and expressions of the circumstance and conditions of Africa. These students' knowledge also enabled them to ward off stereotypical notions, perspectives, and over-simplistic racist views of Africa. These students' knowledge of Africa and particular groups of African Peoples tended to go beyond mass media Hollywood images and depictions to a more substantive approach of African Peoples pre and post European contact and conquest. In many ways the knowledge base and content of European American students overshadowed the U.S. African American Students, which in part is due to the differential education opportunities and exposure to information that comes out of predominantly U.S. African American Schools and Curriculums vs U.S. European American Schools and Curriculums. European U.S. American Schools and Curriculums in many ways reflects the socioeconomic privileges of teachers who are able to present more inclusive integrative knowledge that is reflective in the lesson plans and pedagogical practices.

Another probable factor that may have influenced the differences between these two groups is the higher educational rank and status of the U.S. European American Students I interviewed whom were chiefly upper level undergraduates. Most of the U.S. African American Students I interviewed and conducted focus groups with were first year freshman underclassmen. In many of these cases, the older, more educationally advanced upperclassmen comprised U.S. European American Students that had taken more college course in which Africa and its inhabitants were described and discussed in greater detail.

Students' responses to experiences and familiarity with Africa resulted in different social group interpretations of the impact of slavery on Africa and U.S. African Americans. This was manifested in different kinds of socioemotional ties and connections. U.S. African American Students felt strong socioemotional ties and connection to Africa, void of substantive knowledge of and experiences with Africa and continental Africans. U.S. European American Students lacked any significant socioemotional ties or connections to Africa and U.S. African Americans, but they possessed significantly more knowledge and familiarity with Africa. U.S. European American Students' inability to tie and connect themselves to the historical and contemporary circumstances and experiences of Africa, and with continental Africans and U.S. African Americans, was manifest in empathic approaches and understandings of the contemporary salience of race and racism in and beyond Africa. Both race and racism as face-to-face and institutionalized forms that manifest in the social identities and experiences of U.S. African Americans that constitute a subtext of what it means to be an African beyond the continent of Africa. U.S. European American Students' approach and understandings of the socioemotional ties and connections of U.S. African Americans to and with Africa is impeded by their misunderstanding of the historical and contemporary understandings of how race and racism impacts the lives and identities of U.S. African American Students. In many ways, U.S. African American Students demonstrate a vision of themselves as African Peoples living in the U.S. under the global Pan-African presence and salience of race and racism.

U.S. European American Students used sympathetic approaches and understandings that demonstrate both a lack of imagination and inability to empathetically connect with continental Africans and U.S. African Americans. Even though U.S. European American Students possessed greater knowledge of Africa, they were unable to approach and understanding race and racism on the lives and identities of U.S. African Peoples. With dissolution and abandonment, U.S. European American Students decried The Middle Passage but were unable to connect The Middle Passage and slavery in the U.S. to the contemporary feelings, circumstances, conditions, identities, and experiences of U.S. African Americans.

## Conclusion

The responses of 30 U.S. African and European American College Students about their notions of, knowledge of, and experiences with Africa provides great insight into how many U.S. Americans feel strong socioemotional ties and connection to Africa, void of negative notions and perceptions about, knowledge of, and experiences with Africa. While many students had different understandings and expressed different perspectives about their experiences with Africa, primarily related to the impact of slavery in Africa, on The Middle Passage, and in the Americas, a focus on the collective decry of slavery is important. The collective decry of slavery post-European contact and conquests in Africa yields some suggestions about how all students can connect with one another based on both this history and their decrying of the treatment of African Peoples.

More inclusive understandings and explanations of how and why U.S. African Americans envision Africa as central to their social identities and experiences involves garnering the strength of all students collective decrying of slavery during these periods. Pushing forth a discussion of both empathic and sympathetic approaches and perspectives about slavery and the existence of the enslaved is key. Also, an acknowledgement and recognition of the contemporary feelings and the strong socioemotional ties and connections the descendants of Africa hold today is also central to a deeper more comprehensive understanding of the impact of slavery in the U.S. In particular, U.S. African American Students' empathetic approach to slavery and enslaved Africans during these historical periods says much about the contemporary perceptions they have of Africa that are important aspects of their lives, lifestyles, identities, and experiences in the U.S. Both historical and contemporary approaches and understanding of the salience of race and racism over time and location are also foundational for harvesting all students' collective denouncement of race-based slavery and its contemporary remnants.

The lives and lifestyles of Africans in Africa, in relation to the lives, lifestyles, and circumstances and conditions of U.S. African Americans, says much about the similarities of perpetual racial oppression, which continues to subjugate African Peoples in and beyond Africa. A continued interrogation of the impact of race and racism as manifest in race-based structural inequalities needs to be linked to efforts for racial justice that require the re-envisioning of wholesale social systems rooted in racial apartheid and segregation in both Africa and the U.S.

Educational engagement of complex multi-layered forms of Afrocentrisms via diverse, unified, holistic Afrocentricities is one revolutionary approach to confronting and dealing with the negative impact of race and racism on 'Peoples of the African Diaspora' (Asante 2017; Douglas and Peck 2013; Dei 1994; Jennings and Marvin 2005). Afrocentric educational and pedagogical approaches are among the chief ways to combat racial oppression, injustice, and inequality (Shockley and Cleveland 2011; Smallwood 2001).

Visualizing race as a fundamental part of the exploitation of labor, and as central to the socioeconomic structuring of inequality in and beyond Africa, can help U.S. African and European Americans to better see and understand how, and perhaps why, U.S. African Americans self-perceive and identify with the past, present, and future of Africa.

## Notes

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## **Appendix: Focus Group and In-depth Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about Africa. What are some of your notions and perceptions of Africa? What did you know of Africa? About Africa? What comes to mind when you think about Africa?
2. Do you know of any civilizations? About any empires? Any of the capitals or countries? The geography? The land, religions, people, cultures, politics, racial and/or ethnic conflicts?
3. What do you know about slavery in Africa pre- and post- European contact? During The Middle Passage? How do you feel about what you know? About what you don't know?
4. If Africans are from Africa, how did they get here to the U.S.? What do you know about that? What do you think the conditions and experience were like, from Africa to the Americas? What are they currently doing here, and better yet, how are they currently doing here in the U.S.?