

An exploration of perceptions of race and gender identity as it pertains to Black womanhood within the context of international education.

What is the magnitude of the role played by international education in personal perceptions of gender and race identity, if any at all?

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"I have created a lifestyle that supports contemplation, service to words." - bell hooks

The sentiment above is an accurate and effective way of describing the intellectual, social and emotional genesis of this research. My experiences will always have both the luxury and the misery of being subjected to extreme contemplation and theoretical dissection. I have tried to get through high school, and now university, as a regular college student without self-imposed concerns which catapult me into all-encompassing existential sociopolitical angst. I've failed. This paper is a manifestation of that failure. It is, however, also a manifestation of endless, intense examination of the personal as political. It's safe to say that this intellectualization is a failure I'm proud of. It has left me both with a profound sense of clarity as well as crippling confusion, and it has left me wanting more. It's my hope that it does the same for you.

Importantly, this research has some very specific and ambitious aims. It aims to understand the degree to which my international education has complicated my understanding of my race and gender identity. In other words, what are the ways in which I used to think about my Blackness as well as my womanhood and, more importantly, how do I think of those aspects of my identity in the present? If there has been a change, which there has, what is the degree to which my prestigious international education has impacted that? What stands out to me in my reflections and/or articulations of my race and gender identity and how is that related to my education, if at all? By "international education," I am not just referring to what I've learned in the classroom, I'm referring to the entire experience of living and learning abroad in predominantly white, abundantly resourced, Western institutions.

Importantly, the premise of this research primarily supposes that the context in which the the international education is situated, necessarily and dramatically differs from my primary context. That is, I have not always attended the kinds of institutions I have described above. Therewith, when I refer to "home," infer that it is a context which had not previously afforded me with all the "opportunities" to which I now have easy, free and painless access.

In exploring the role of international education in the perception of gender and race identity, this research not only acknowledges the crucial and/or consequential role of education in shaping identity, it also seeks to draw on existing theories and/or bodies of scholarship to articulate the personal, social and political ramifications of an international education. The structure of this paper is one which attempts to, above all, bring you along with me on my reflections in the clearest way possible. In pursuit of that clarity of articulation, I have explored, specifically, the major themes and/or concepts of international education, social capital as privilege, gender (womanhood) as well as race (Blackness).

Specifically, I ask the following questions:

- What is the magnitude of the role played by education in personal perceptions of gender and race identity, if any at all?
- What characterizes the typically under-represented intersection between dramatically different educational contexts?
- How do we make meaningful deductions of the effects of cultural code-switching on students within international education?
- How can individuals who exist within these intersections be better capacitated to facilitate a meaningful synthesis between dramatically different educational contexts?

While that list is not exhaustive, the questions above will be the primary cornerstones which inform my research. Using education as the variable to explore meaningful differences in context, this research will draw on existing work and bodies of scholarship within the field of International Relations to explore the presumably life-changing effects of differences in educational context.

When I first set foot onto the United World College Changshu China campus, my mind was blown. The grass had the kind of green which you would only see on television, the remarkably huge campus was on an island, and the teachers were literally some of the best in the world. In reality, the school had the energy of the poster child for the perfect international school. The dreams I had bought into from the website and brochure were finally coming alive. I was excited because everyone told me that this would open up “a world of opportunities.” At the time, I didn’t quite understand what that meant. I do now.

UWC and, by extension, the world it has opened up to me, was and continues to be, one of the best things that has ever happened to me. As it turns out, ironically, it’s also one of the worst things that have ever happened to me - or at least for the way I now perceive my Blackness and womanhood.

It’s important to mention that the UWC school model was and continues to be fundamentally rooted in a celebration of political identity - often exemplified by dramatic “UWC days” with the aim of “celebrating difference” or hanging small posters of national flags all around campus in an attempt to demonstrate our supposed institutional ability to accommodate “intercultural understanding.” I love my alma mater. I do. If I could, I’d do it all over again. But I have to admit that the hyper-emphasis on indigenous or “unique” political identities served as a starting point for a social and personal cultural confusion which persists until this day. That confusion was largely borne out of an inability to reconcile my sociopolitical experiences with what seemed to be expected of me. I was unable to put on the elaborate cultural performance which was often expected of me; an expectation which was communicated through the slightest of social cues. That is, I often had to explain why I didn’t know any “Namibian Christmas songs,” why I spoke and wrote English “so well,” and why I was fluent in German. I had to explain why I knew Dave Chapelle, Kim Kardashian and why my favorite movie is High School Musical.

The social demands to perform a specific cultural identity continue to inform my thinking until date. All of these questions, and the answers thereto - if any - continue to be important to me. But perhaps the most important of all is this: *What does it mean to be black, woman and African in elitist, predominantly white institutions which serve as such pervasive symbols of white monopoly capital?* Is it betrayal to attend these institutions?

More importantly, is it betrayal to value the opportunities afforded to me by virtue of my institutional associations? Is my active endorsement of UWC and now, Claremont McKenna College, an affirmation of the perceived superiority of Western models of education? Most significantly, what are the ways in which the answers to those questions affect my perception of my political identity? This research paper is an honest and somewhat desperate attempt to answer those questions by reflecting on my personal experiences through the lenses of nuanced academia.

International Education

“UWC makes education a force to unite people, nations and cultures, for peace and a sustainable future.” The first time we chanted this at assembly, it felt right. Mostly because, as an impressionable young teenager, the sentiments expressed in the United World Colleges mission statement make intuitive sense. It’s the kind of statement which is easy to absorb, memorize and regurgitate. In my experience, however, I find that upon further scrutiny, the essential philosophy of the statement, which is effectively reflective of the philosophy which underpins all international education, does not hold up all that much. It has taken me a while to even begin to make sense of my gnawing doubtfulness towards the essence of international education - which is that world peace and meaningful, collectively beneficial international relations can be achieved through proactive collaboration and “intercultural understanding.” Admittedly, there are some important truths in that widespread notion. However, there are elements which fall apart under further analysis.

Importantly, my initial qualm with the intuitive suggestions of the practice of international education began in December of 2019. During this time, the UWC Changshu China community was celebrating Christmas. One evening, we were setting up decorations when my best friend at the time, a white, cis-heterosexual girl, asked me to teach her some “Christmas carols from Namibia.” She asked me this because she was so intrigued by my intense familiarity with classics like “*Jingle Bell Rock*,” “*Santa Claus is Coming to Town*,” and Michael Buble’s “*This Christmas*.” It dawned on me that her assumption was that these jams were necessarily and inherently different from “Namibian culture.” The confusion on her face when I explained that these were indeed what I sing back home -

and not just to perform assimilation to whiteness - was the starting point of my active academic probing into multicultural self-identification, as well as the dynamics of said identification in the face of the expectation to deliver on assumptions of the native. My friend had the same reaction - of confusion and even bewilderment - when she visited Namibia and asked me to take her and her family to my favorite hangout spot. I took her to NewsCafe, an uptown, European style restaurant which serves French fries, mojitos and other cuisine of "the West." She explained that she expected something more "Namibian" and more "traditional." The bottom-line in both of those experiences of "intercultural understanding" reveal a crucial, fundamental and hugely significant layer of analysis to the practice of international education. Ian Hill, in his exploration, *Multicultural Education & International Education*, in his definition of "international education," best captures my personal experience. He rightly points out that there is no intrinsic link between nationality and culture and, importantly, that most nations have some level of cultural diversity, but that not all of citizens of those nations necessarily have the skills of intercultural understanding needed for everyone in a particular community to co-exist harmoniously (Hill, 254). Equally significant, Hill points out that a "new transnational cultural identity amongst elites may be taking shape (Hill, 254)." While I wasn't born to diplomats and have lived in Namibia my whole life, my most impressionable years were filled with exposure to American culture; with childhood favorite movies such as Camp Rock and Hannah Montana. That is, some of my most intimate cultural identifications are, for the most part, "un-Namibian." I speak four European languages and one native, African language. My favorite food is Mac & Cheese and for as long as I can remember, I have been reading about snowy winter nights, fire places and "the Big Apple," despite never having experienced any of those things in real life. The lens through which I view the world makes me more culturally (socio-economically) similar to my white friend than say, an underprivileged girl in an informal settlement in Namibia. That is, the kinds of students who have access to elite international schools such as UWC have a distinct cultural code amongst themselves, despite their relative differences in national identity. The question then becomes, how is any international student to fairly "represent" their respective country when the social capital which presumably allowed them to access that international education is one which distinguishes them in the first place? In other

words, how am I supposed to sing “Namibian” Christmas carols and/or take my (white) friend to a more “Namibian” eatery when I have accumulated experiences which do not allow to identify with “uniquely Namibian” identifiers to begin with? The current suggestion of international education, as it stands, is one which implies that the students which constitute the community of an international school such as the United World College, are necessarily largely familiar with the most unique cultural experiences of their respective home countries. In the face of that consideration, practitioners of international education now need to actively champion a characterization of international education which necessarily supposes that there are vastly different yet equally legitimate viewpoints even within similar contexts. Even after successfully championing such a definition, practitioners of international education school models would still need to determine whether the assumed cultural differences which exist between different students in an international schooling community are significantly consequential enough to warrant any degree of institutional and/or collective attention. In other words, does it matter that my white friend and I are from different countries if we both subscribe to a practically similar cultural code? In attempting to answer that question, Hill, in his work, suggests that “*the distinguishing feature of international education is the study of issues which have application beyond national borders and to which the competencies of intercultural understanding, critical thinking and collaboration are applied in order to shape attitudes which will be conducive to mutual respect and global sustainable development for the future of the human race* (Hill, 255).” The model of international education proposed by Hill in this characterization is substantiated by Reginald Smart. If Hill argues that intercultural understanding ought to shape attitudes, then Smart attempts to define what those attitudes ought to be. Specifically, Smart argues that one of the critical components of international education is the “controlled permeation of new ideas (Smart, 443).” Smart argues that controlled permeation of new ideas can mean encouragement or restraint of those ideas and that superficially, the choice seems easier in relation to the sciences than to humanities (Smart, 444). Smart is not entirely wrong in his characterization of international education. It is indeed true that international education seeks to teach particular values. At the United World College, the distinct value systems around which the collective ideological were built were namely: international and intercultural

understanding, celebration of difference, personal responsibility and integrity, compassion and service, environmentalism and a sense of idealism, to mention a few. Admittedly, these are easier to teach and/or gear around. The ability to teach and/or enforce the aforementioned principles in pursuit of global geopolitical collaboration confirms Smart's suggestion that it may be easier for ideals to permeate into a group of international students. At the same time, however, Smart's argument implores us to explore the power imbalance which inevitably characterizes a dynamic in which there is the teacher and the learner. In other words, we ask ourselves, in the permeation of "new" ideas, who are these ideas new to? Who is the teacher and why do they get to teach? What are the forces in the world which have legitimated their particular value system so much so that it warrants imposition on individuals who do not immediately identify with that culture?

To clarify, UWC, for instance, was and remains a predominantly Western model of education. Its idealistic foundation is one which upholds liberal, primarily Eurocentric values. The IB is, in itself, an originally French educational prescription. The pragmatic dynamics of the international school community as defined in this research is that students come to a particular institution to live and learn. Surely, that institution has its own socio-cultural ethos which governs even the way in which internationalism is institutionally performed. A perfect example of power struggle which significantly characterizes international education was exemplified by a minor confrontation with my Philosophy teacher. After she had finished introducing the curriculum to us, I asked why there was an imbalance in the ratio of European to African philosophers. Her response was that there is still work being done to substantially incorporate African philosophy. Until this day, I wonder what "African philosophy" is, considering that there is usually no talk of such a thing as "European philosophy," it's generally just philosophy. This exchange was crucially important in my educational journey. It signaled my naivety in thinking that international education truly meant international education. I started to think that maybe it meant - to borrow Smart's terminology - a controlled permeation of ideas from whoever has the social, cultural and economic monopoly on knowledge creation and production onto cultural communities with relatively less capacity. Because why else would it be that, in an "international education model" it was easier for me, as a Black student, to access

the intellectual products of white authors, than it would be for my white schoolmates to access intellectual property belonging to Black authors?

In the same line, Smart argues that a core component of international education is a synthesis of value systems and a singular world culture; that is “a discovery of the universal” and then production of individuals who embody it (Smart, 444). Here, Smart proposes a type of intercultural exchange which is carefully organized to get us beyond ethnocentrism closer to a collective tolerance - and perhaps even appreciation for - difference. Smart’s proposition is substantiated by Ward, who posits that the function and/or role of international education is to produce a world of individuals “whose minds and tastes have been so modified that they recognize themselves primarily as world citizens (Ward, 1967).” As demonstrated by my encounter in my Philosophy class, it’s clear that the institution which “administers” the operations of the international education possesses the technical as well as the socio-cultural upper hand. In light of that important acknowledgement, it’s crucial that we ask ourselves whether the desired synthesis of cultures is possible in the presence of an arguable cultural monopoly on knowledge creation and production. Smart articulates this imbalance brilliantly by outlining the practical problems which undermine the desired intercultural understanding of international school models. He argues that the first problem is the unspoken, embarrassing feeling of denigration involved in always being on the receiving end. For instance, having to understand that there is simply not enough “African philosophy” in our curriculum and that there is nothing I could practically do about it because that is just the way things are/were. As a scholarship beneficiary, my active pursuit of an education from a United World College already - in countless ways - endorses that particular schooling system as superior and necessarily desirable. Being on the receiving end, and being distinctly aware of that positioning, significantly reduced my capacity as well as agency to show up in a way which would accelerate the full actualization of the goal of intercultural understanding. Secondly and equally important, Smart also points out the practical problem which is the difficulty of keeping the assumptions, concerns and needs of the donor nation subservient to those of the recipient, by granting the latter the final say about the situation, needs, guiding principles and specific plans involved (Smart, 447). This problem is accompanied by the pressure placed on recipients to perform the cultural

identities which landed them access to these institutions in the first place. In other words, how does a Black, Sub-Saharan African, Namibian woman maintain the legitimacy of her role in an international community without choosing to be fundamentally defined by any “unique” identifiers of the aforementioned labels? Is identification outside of those labels possible in an international schooling context? Most importantly, in the case where the cultural, native expectations of a specific country govern the way in which nationals of that country are received, what happens when a student doesn’t perform any of those? Which entity do we prioritize? The individual or the nation? That* is the question of international school models like UWC.

Therewith, both authors make crucially important suggestions for the ways in which the ultimate objectives of international education are undermined. However, in the face of these important intellectual contributions, the questions remain unanswered and complex. The propositions explored achieve the hugely significant aim of aiding in the articulation of the questions, but that is all they remain... questions with answers defined uniquely and exclusively by the individuals pondering the often confusing intersection between dramatically different contexts which play equally important roles in shaping our identities, as well as our perceptions thereof.

The Translation of Social Resources into Social Capital

I walked into my Economics Higher Level class and to my surprise, every single student had an Apple computer and/or MacBook. At home, where I come from, any Apple product - especially an Apple computer - is indicative of serious economic privilege. I had only ever seen corporate executives with Apple computers, and even those, I could probably count on one hand. Here at my new high school, however, it was the standard student computer. It sounds like a simple, even silly experience, but it was pretty baffling for me. It was my first distinct insight into the dramatic differences which characterized the respective standards of living in Namibia and the residential campus which was to be my home for the next two years. The same bewilderment overcame me when I realized that the standard mobile phone was/is the Apple iPhone. But here’s what was even more baffling, at home, I was relatively privileged. But here, I couldn’t even begin to imagine

the collective cost of owning both an Apple computer and* an iPhone. This observation was the starting point of my deep reflection into socioeconomic and, by extension, class difference, as well as the complication which accompanies the occupation of both lower class in one context, and upper class in another. I came to call it rich kid by day and poor kid by night. This complication and subsequent confusion was particularly intensified by the reality that I was constantly at the helm of immense wealth and socioeconomic privilege, without ever really having been at the centre of that immense privilege. The dual, simultaneous occupation of a wide, nuanced range of different socioeconomic classes also forced me scrutinize the distance between different socioeconomic brackets and, by extension, the capacity for mobility across the respective classes. The most important and significant question I have come to ask myself as it pertains to class and socioeconomic upward mobility has been one which seeks to address the role of social and cultural capital in accessing opportunity.

Nan Lin explains it best in his work, *Symposium*, by carefully breaking down the source of social capital. Lin, who suggests that social capital is a translation of social resources, maintains that there are two main explanations for the prevalence of inequality in social capital. Firstly, he argues that there are structural, institutional processes and systems which uphold inequality in social capital (Lin, 786). He posits that depending on the process of social, historical and institutional constructions, each society has structurally provided unequal opportunities to members of different groups defined over race, gender, religion, sexuality or “other ascribed constructed characteristics (Lin, 787)”. Moreover, Lin suggests that the second principle - homophily, outlines the general tendency in networking: the inclination for individuals to interact and share experiences with others who have similar characteristics (Lin, 787). Importantly, Lin argues that members belonging to resource abundant communities typically enjoy access to information (and, therefore, the opportunity to amass and make use of social and cultural capital), whereas poorer communities have access to limited amounts of information as well as experience, if any at all (Lin, 787). It’s at this particular juncture that it becomes important for me to hone in on my own cultural and social capital. Let’s go back all the way to my childhood. While I was admittedly born into a relatively modest household, I did have access to the kind of information which opened me up to the world in hugely significant ways. I read

books about ginger beer, the American dream, blue skies and snow-filled white Christmases. This insight is more important than it initially seems. The exposure to cultural Western trademarks, like Disney channel movies and/or say Mariah Carey, gave me the arsenal I needed to be able to navigate Western cultural models like they were home. My pre-existing familiarity with Western culture provided me with the cultural arsenal needed to navigate a primarily Western school model. The curriculum, the International Baccalaureate, which was in English, was a breeze for me precisely because I was born into the kind of family which could afford to send me to schools which primarily carried out academic instruction in English. My most gnawing reflection on my socio-cultural reflection, however, was the following question: *how big was the role played by my social and cultural capital in accessing the educational privilege I was able to access?* What are the ways in which my cultural resources, which effectively translate into social capital, accelerate and/or intensify my access to educational privilege? Equally important, I often felt a sense of guilt for acclimatizing so easily to the elitist cultural cues and social mannerisms of my school environment. By extension, I also wondered about the degree to which that acclimatization helped me navigate my experience more easily. Pierre Bourdieu confirms my suspicions on the extent of my social and cultural capital by arguing that schools reflect and are responsive to the cultural orientations of the dominant class (Kingston, 89). He further argues that the “elite” children are strongly socialized at home to their class culture - come to school with dispositions that distinctly “fit” the cultural biases of this institution, and are then rewarded in school for their particular cultural orientations. Significantly, he argues that the cultural resources of the elite significantly account for their academic and social success. He further substantiates his position by arguing that the elite’s children are presumed to have the advantage of learning the valued dispositions in their homes, thereby acquiring a distinctive “natural ease” (Kingston, 89). In his bold argument that “cultural capital is largely the property of the existing elite,” he also maintains that cultural capital is institutionalized, and that widely shared cultural signals are used for social and cultural exclusion (Kingston, 89). It is important to highlight that Bourdieu’s argument seems largely directed at the benefits of associations with “high” and/or dominant culture, such as familiarity with French literature and/or affinity with art museums etc. It’s also worth noting that my social and cultural

capital was not afforded to me by associations with high culture, but necessarily by associations with the dominant culture. That is, I was endowed with a pre-existing familiarity with Western popular culture. Importantly, within the context of this research, the distinction between popular culture and high culture is not one which is consequentially significant. In both definitions, the intellectual suggestion remains that a pre-existing familiarity with particular aspects of a “dominant” culture translate into social resources with real, material impacts on an individual level.

UWC was a Western school model developed by a German education practitioner, Kurt Hahn. The dominant culture in UWC was one which, for instance, implicitly rewarded ability and knowledge of English. There were English language learning centers which invested a significant amount of resources in teaching students who struggled with the language. The struggle of some of the students whose speech was dominated by their native languages often translated into academic, and social distress. Hence, my performance of particular cultural cues, such as accents, gestures etc, was a powerful social resource I was able to access to help me navigate a Western schooling model successfully. In analyzing Bourdieu’s suggestions of The Cultural Capital Theory, an important question arises: “what extent do endowments of cultural capital statistically account for the relationship between social privilege and school success? (Kingston, 91)” For instance, social capital can also be manifested in what is often assumed to be a universal, relative degree of comfort with asking questions in class or speaking up with a different suggestion and/counter contribution to the teaching authority. While my experience confirms Bourdieu’s suggested relationship between social capital as well as socio-cultural success, Paul DiMaggio argues otherwise. He instead suggests that cultural capital facilitates the success of anyone who has it and not the success of a particular class, a phenomenon he termed the ‘*cultural mobility model*’ (Kingston, 92). In that, he argues that nonelite students can indeed benefit from cultural capital. The most significant and/or consequential difference between Bourdieu and DiMaggios’ argument is the origin of social and cultural capital or more specifically, how one comes to acquire it. While DiMaggio argues that anyone with strategically significant social resources can access meaningful socio-cultural privilege, Bourdieu posits that said acquisition is deeply embedded in the socialization patterns of elite families (Kingston, 92). Both theorists have

the same underpinning ideology, however, that cultural capital matters. My experience feels more accurately articulated by DiMaggio. As someone from non-elite family, I was still able to hugely benefit from the social and cultural capital which I had amassed by virtue of access to the dominant culture. Importantly, apart from learning to speak English, there are some more delicate, volatile and hugely debatable cultural points of relatability to the dominant culture in my international school. For instance, the UWC values outlined earlier in this paper. That is, the UWC idealistic value system easily appealed to me because of a pre-existing familiarity with the essence of the ideals. For instance, “environmentalism” might have been easier for me to grasp because I have grown up not only with jingles concerning the environment, but also because I’m able to speak the language (English) which allows me to access information about UWC ideals and the like in the first place. In the same way, the aspirational message that we can and should “change the world,” easily resonates with someone who is, very early on, exposed to narratives such as that of Barack Obama, John D Rockefeller and/or Martin Luther King - all people who “changed the world.” The principles propagated by the UWC value system are questionable in legitimacy primarily because the institution (in my case, my international school) which perpetuates them has a strong and undeniable link to a specific subset of culture in the world. However, we realize that upon further scrutiny, the earlier stated “UWC values” which I’ve described as feeling intuitively “Western” thus far are arguably not necessarily and/or inherently Western. In fact, there’s a danger in defining progressive values, and one’s association therewith, as necessarily Western. Paul Kingston captures it articulately by positing that of course what represents a “good” work habit is not an absolutely culture-free concept (Kingston, 95). He states that doing homework for instance, is good in a culture which rewards mastery of the knowledge used “in a modern society - as well as compliance with authoritative directives in complex organizations (Kingston, 95).” Essentially, Kingston is making the argument that objectively progressive values such as a sense of idealism or even the fundamental idea of a value system in itself, should not be reduced to being an exclusively Western concept. It mischaracterizes, undermines and demeans other cultural systems in the implicit suggestion that a system of values in itself is a concept which is exclusive to the West. In the same way, a reading of progressive values as necessarily Western works as a

dangerously close throwback to an era in which there were “the civilized and the uncivilized.” Defining values such as respect for the environment, for instance as fundamentally Western leaves us with the question: what is the alternative? The answer to that question - if any at all - can lead us into two intellectually significant conclusions: either that there are no alternatives because progressive values are intuitively and effectively universal; or that my inability to imagine a world with alternatives to UWC values is exactly the problem and/or point.

Blackness

My experience of my racial identity at UWC has been an awkward one. Let me start this section off by recognizing, acknowledging and honoring all of the myriad ways in which, as Black people, we experience our blackness, at different times, in different - equally valid - ways.

Moreover, I’ve obviously always been black. But my blackness feels different in different places. More specifically, my blackness felt more present, more distinct and generally more hyper-visible when I went to UWC and now, CMC. Let me walk you through some experiences to illustrate what I mean. I’m walking in the cafeteria and, as usual, minding my own business. My hair is in its natural state and... you guessed it! Someone touched my hair. Now this was the first time I was able to explicitly relate to such a distinctly “American” Black experience. That is, in Namibia, we are relatively racially homogenous. In other words, there are many, many Black people in Namibia. Therewith, nobody is particularly fascinated by anyone else’s hair. However, when my schoolmate touched my hair in the canteen, it was confirmed to me that I had officially entered a space in which my Blackness was now something I was constantly going to be expected to perform and explain, in different ways. The amusement at and romanticization of Blackness is also one which followed me into the classroom. Particularly English classrooms in which I was constantly explaining why I did so well in that class. Had I gone to a private school back home? Had I been privately tutored? Had I lived in Namibia my entire life?

This new realization was confirmed in another, especially delicate cultural moment which bordered on plain awkward. I was standing in line behind my (German) classmate. I

turned around and greeted her, in German, in pure fun faith and good spirits. I saw the aghast look on her face and proceeded to ask her, in German, whether she was alright. I was genuinely confused until she asked me how I know German. You can only imagine the awkwardness which followed after I explained that Namibia was colonized by Germany and that I went to one of two German schools in the country. It's also an awkwardness which permeated the rest of our friendship.

In the same way, my (white) friend and I were watching Youtube videos on my computer. Just as luck would have it, one of the recommended videos displayed by my home page was one which told of the horrific crimes against humanity committed by King Leopold in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This friend was Belgian. She also had no idea of the atrocities committed by who she and her Belgian classmates as well as fellow countrymen had come to know as a national hero and victor. Again, take a moment to imagine the awkwardness which infused the experience of watching that video together, as well as the moments thereafter. Racially, that was an awkward experience because it explicitly and loudly reminded us both of the distinct imbalance in the respective capacity of black and white communities respectively. Watching a video in which Black people were being incapacitated and denied fundamental human rights because of the colour of their skin, and the only source of escape from that misery being exclusively in the hands of a white authority, made for a very uncomfortable, unspoken set of dynamics between the two of us. I tell these different stories to give an insight into the myriad of ways in which Black people can be Black. Explaining hair, justifying identity and asserting humanity typically underpin those experiences.

The different possibilities of Blackness all speak to a crucially important aspect of racial identity: cultural performativity. There is a specific and/or particular set of expectations which are often prescribed alongside Blackness. Those expectations are even more skewed and/or confusing when they are imposed by distinctly different groups of people. Hugo Canham and Rejane Williams brilliantly capture the awkwardness of expectations of cultural performativity through their analysis of the identity of the black middle class. Importantly, a social identification construct such as the aforementioned carries two vastly different sets of prescriptions; prescriptions informed largely and/or primarily by collective,

social and historical experiences. That is, the notion of a black middle class faces both expectations from a black lower class as well as their white, middle class counterparts. Canham and Williams posit the significantly important point that as it pertains to the Black middle class, “we speculate that their class mobility and transition into previously exclusionary spaces would provide an opportunity to explore new dimensions involved in experiences of race, racism and racialization (Canham and Williams, 24).” Importantly, Canham & Williams manage to articulate perhaps one of my most pertinent experiences as a Black, upper middle class (by Namibian standards) student at UWC. That is, they point out the dual struggle of the black middle class, characterized by negotiating their deservingness of their middle-class status, while simultaneously performing their loyalty and solidarity to their blackness. The excessive desire to perform Blackness can be insidious and all-consuming because, as rightly pointed out by these thinkers, those perceived to be distancing themselves from Blackness by adopting beliefs and/or behaviours consistent with whiteness are seen as traitors (Canham & Williams, 39). They state that “middle class black people who have the material trappings of whiteness often seek to perform blackness through language and maintaining distinct boundaries between suburban and township life (Canham and Williams, 39).” The psychological stress of two gazes (the white gaze as well as the black gaze) can become opposing forces which both demand cultural demonstrations of class solidarity. The white gaze signals that demand through the excessive and insistent attempt to police blackness and prescribe acceptable forms being black. That is, as suggested by Canham & Williams, the white gaze attempts to control, inferiorize and negate Blackness while claiming ignorance and colour-blindness to evade its own problematization (Canham and Williams, 28). The black gaze, on the other hand, “monitors the transgression of class boundaries and accepted norms of Black behavior (Canham and Williams, 29).” When we consider Canham & Williams’ definition of “gaze,” which is that seeks to discipline the object of its attention with the accompanying effect of one’s internalization of the norms of the one who gazes (Canham and Williams, 29),” it becomes clear that the presence of any gaze can be distressing. Even more so for groups who face multiple gazes.

I’ve had several encounters in which I have felt the distinct difference between counteracting gazes. Now in light of the accurate scholastic expectations by Canham and

William, I'll walk you through two of them. So it's Black History Week on campus and the entire Black community is mobilizing, in different ways to showcase "Black culture." Dramatic story pause number 1. I don't understand or agree with the notion of a "Black culture." I believe that, in the same operational fashion as the white gaze, it essentializes Blackness and makes superficial prescriptions for definitions of what is and isn't legitimate Blackness. That is, if we were to agree that there is a "Black culture," surely that would mean that any Black person who does not satisfactorily live up to or visibly identify with "Black culture" would have their racial identity subjected to distressing scrutiny. Anyways, my distrust of the idea of Black culture necessarily meant a natural reluctance to help plan a series of events meant to "showcase Black culture." It was this line of thinking which led up to easily one of the most awkward socio-cultural moments in my entire life. On the day that some members of the Black community decided to go out and do some grocery shopping for Black History Week, I had a planned lunch date with a (very white) friend of mine. During lunch time, my friend and I walked past a group of about 15 members of the Black community, on our way to catch the bus. Before you could say "black gaze," I got a text message notification from a Black friend of mine, who was part of the group, telling me that the least I could do was not walk past them when I demonstrated such blatant disregard for the sanctity of Black culture, and for the Black community's efforts to uphold that sanctity. At the same time, the friend I was on my way to lunch with, asked me why I wasn't going to the mall with the other Black students to go shopping for Black History Week. That was the first time I came face to face with the social phenomenon described by Canham and Williams. If my (Black) friend's sentiments are/were anything to go by in that moment, it's safe to say that she must have perceived me as a social and cultural traitor of sorts. Her reaction was perfectly articulated by Franz Fanon, author of the infamous *Black Skin White Masks*, that "the slightest departure is seized on and picked apart." In that moment, I had very visibly deviated from my performance of Blackness. I was visibly defying the symbolic boundaries meant to reinforce race divisions and, in that moment, my non-conformity to explicit Blackness as collectively defined by the Black community at UWC was problematized. Moreover, Canham and Williams outline my experience through their work by acknowledging that the act of policing blackness typically occurs through distinct and steady yet subtle and indirect operations of the gaze

(Canham and Williams, 32). Herewith, the thinkers rightly acknowledge that the primary function of the black gaze is to solidify markers of blackness so as to distinguish - and by extension police and micromanage - the boundary signifying who is really black and who is an imposter (Canham and Williams, 36). While my (black) friend's behavior in that moment was an explicit illustration of the black gaze (and the audacity thereof), my (white) friend's remark is also one which is worth paying attention to. Her questioning my choice to not explicitly identify with and perform solidarity to the Black community in that moment was an action which is allusive to Canham and Williams' suggestion that the white gaze attempts to police blackness, thereby maintaining white cultural hegemony. I acknowledge that it would be a more generous interpretation of my (white) friend's question to simply dismiss it as curiosity. But it's also important to recognize the dangerous fundamental assumption incorporated into her question: that I have the social capacity to have the option of going to the mall with my Black classmates simply because they are Black. She had no context of any of my relationships with any of the Black students which made up the group she saw, if any at all. The assumption that the option to "hang out" with other Black students because* I am Black was available to me, made my Blackness hypervisible; a hypervisibility which was then used as an accessory in her implicit policing of how to actualize my racial identity.

In the same way, as the season for college applications rolled around, I applied to institutions of higher learning based on a number of things. Geography, curricular emphasis, student body size, ranking, etc. In my youthful, political naivety and blissful ignorance, I hadn't paid much attention to racial demographic numbers of the student body population. I ended up in a very interesting situation. At around the same time, I received admissions offers from Howard University, a historically Black College and/or University, as well as Claremont McKenna College, a predominantly white institution. I didn't think much about my choice to go to CMC then, but now, in hindsight, I wonder what it means, if anything at all. I've self-policed my way into extreme guilt informed by the subconscious belief that opting to go to a PWI instead of a HBCU is perhaps the most explicit form of pandering to whiteness as the ideal. Both are incredible institutions, which open up a world of opportunities to students. To this day, I dwell on the implications of my decision to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU. Particularly, it bothers me

tremendously that given the opportunity to go back in time, I'd probably do it again. I want to believe that my choices are immersed in honest, uncontaminated objectivity. I do. But I can't help but wonder about the role of perception in my choice of a tertiary institution. By that, I mean that virtually everywhere in the world, we are taught to aspire to the exist as far away as we possibly can from Blackness. That Black is bad and white is good. We are taught to view whiteness as the ideal, the ultimate goal. This insistence on the essential goodness and superiority of whiteness is communicated in different ways. Mainstream media, jokes, lyrics etc. I want to believe that my choice to attend a PWI over an HBCU was informed exclusively by objective, tangible and even quantifiable parameters. And yes, those considerations did play a role. But more importantly, I also believe that subconscious beliefs of whiteness as the ideal have played an equally consequential role.

My choice of CMC over Howard will always be a tremendously important intellectual contention for me. I'm not certain what it means, if anything at all. What I do know, is that it does not make me any less Black, and does not make me a sell-out. Or perhaps, by the standards of the gatekeepers of Blackness, it does. Importantly, even my reluctance to explore what my choice of a PWI means can be seen as a form of self-policing and self-disciplining by virtue of my proximity to white monopoly capital. As earlier stated, white policing of blackness is mainly characterized by prescriptions of what counts as respectable inhibitions of a Black racial identity. One such prescription is the avoidance of conversations which challenge, threaten and undermine the legitimacy of white hegemony. As Robin Diangelo states in *White Fragility*, it follows that to explicitly and boldly identify whiteness, or to acknowledge that it has material meaning and grants unearned advantage, will be deeply destabilizing, thus triggering the protective responses of white fragility (Diangelo, 28). That is, the overarching prescription is to avoid race conversations in general, or to insist on colour-blindness. In this light, Canham and Williams rightly point out that a consequence of silence and race-neutral discourses is that black people are unable to engage in crucially important conversations about race (Canham and Williams, 35). This has the effect of neutralising the agency of Black people in the face of racism and racialization, while at the same time, problematically attempting to deracialize the narratives of non-white communities (Canham and Williams, 35). The

avoidance of the race-conversation can therefore also be linked to ways in which unexamined fear continues to immobilize black agency and allow white hegemony to benefit from the continued presence of an insidious kind of fear (Canham and Williams, 35).

Feminism

It's lunch time. I'm seated in the cafeteria with a few of my classmates. Unfortunately, at the table, is my arch nemesis. For legal reasons, I'll refer to him as T. T and I have a history of volatile, explosive conversation. Simply, he's racist and* sexist. And I'm intolerant to both, in principle and in practice.

At this particular lunch, the volatility in my interactions with T reaches a whole new level. The lunch time conversation is about affirmative action. I explain the importance thereof and religiously list all the ways in which affirmative action in practice benefits groups which have been historically disadvantaged, for instance, women of color. T goes on to say that the only reason I would make that argument is because I probably wouldn't have gotten into UWC if it wasn't for affirmative action. At this point, I am fuming and shoot back furiously with the fact that I got into UWC because I am just as deserving as he is, if not more. That was, without a doubt, one of the most intellectually significant conversations I have ever had. Not because T made particularly valid contributions, but because I was pushed far back into myself to be honest with myself about whether or not I genuinely believed that I deserved truly did deserve to be there just as much as anyone else; that my Blackness had nothing to do with it. Most significantly, I asked myself, if there was nothing wrong with affirmative action, why did I have a problem with potentially being at an institution largely because of affirmative action?

The ways in which that conversation impacted me have had long-lasting implications on my relationship with my gender and race identity. For a brief second, I despised the source of any doubt of my deservingness to be at UWC. I hated any identifiers which were weaponized against me to imply that I wasn't deserving. The intellectual implications of that conversation have set me on a path of critical analysis of the ways in which I find myself performing my brilliance and overcompensating, all in an attempt to pre-empt any

doubts about my capacity. The insecurity of being Black and a woman was compounded by the classic “are you on a scholarship?” The assumption that being extraordinary and exceptional was the only way I could have possibly gotten into UWC was an overt signal that in my most basic, standard, average form just like all my fellow students, I was not enough. A signal that the standards were different for me. A signal that I needed to be exceptional to gain access and proximity to whiteness. The implicit suggestions that the performance parameters were stricter for me are not just because I’m Black. They existed because I’m Black, a woman and* Sub-Saharan African. As eloquently posited by researchers Ransford and Miller, “the intersection of race and gender creates unique aggregates (Harnois, 809).” In my case, that aggregate was primarily characterized by my sociopolitical burden to prove myself in spite of my Blackness, womanhood and nationality. While fending off doubt about my capacity, I also needed to do the same about my sexuality.

Interestingly, when I brought up my troubles to my friend (yes, the white bestie), she cried because she “had no idea” that I went through “all of that”. She cried because “she couldn’t even begin to imagine” what I must go through on a daily basis. While her empathy was and continues to be admirable in some ways, it’s also the all too common response by white women - a response which signals that the injustice is way too horrific for them to even begin to fathom, thereby creating a significant amount of distance between them and the injustice faced by Black women. My friend’s response not only removes me from the center of my own experience (because the moment she begins to weep, her intense emotional response then takes center stage), but it also enforces her innocence and negates her social positionality as it relates to the systemic injustices faced by women of color. I’m not saying that she is directly or even consciously responsible for the degradation I felt subjected to by T. I am, however, saying that she is representative of systems, structures and/or institutions which reinforce and/or enable the continued oppression of women of color and that it is important that we have the intellectual honesty to engage that truth. Terese Jonsson explains it most elegantly in her research work, *Feminist Complicities*, where she argues that White feminism and/or white women centers white women as the normative, central subjects of feminism (Jonsson, 159). Importantly, Jonsson argues that in addition to failing to critically and effectively

interrogate the focus and orientation of forms of feminist knowledge which reproduce racial hierarchies and ignorance about how whiteness functions, white women are often problematically positioned as having little power to change the dynamics of white dominance (Jonsson, 161). Specifically, Jonsson argues that the dramatized innocence by white women in the face of the injustices faced by non-white women exonerates them from blame for their own racism (Jonsson, 161). The insistence on the innocence and moral purity of white women acts as a strategy for maintaining racial power and signals a continuity with colonial ideals of a pure, moral and “good” white femininity (Jonsson, 162). Equally important, Jonsson points out that the continued treatment of white women as infallible denies the significant relationship between white women and the ongoing colonial project. When the common response is for white women and feminists to distance themselves as far as they possibly can from the injustice faced by Black women, they wrongly maintain that they are oppressed and marginalized rather than willing to consider the ways in which they are oppressors (Jonsson, 163). The ideal and ultimate objective by Jonsson is for White feminists to eventually investigate how, at specific sites, patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism interlock to structure women differently and unequally (Jonsson, 163). Perhaps most importantly, Jonsson points out why it is important for women to shift attention from illusory solidarities (Jonsson, 164) of women as a group towards the hierarchical relations among women. If you’re still confused about why my friend’s response is problematic and even dangerous, we need to understand the fundamental assumption which informed her reaction. To her, my experience of racism was so shocking because not only does she possibly not understand the extent of racism and its intersection with culture, but perhaps most worryingly, she typically operates from the intellectual assumption that, as outlined by Jonsson, “all individuals within a liberal society have access to the same rights - to freedom of speech, for instance (Jonsson, 128).” The assumption from which my friend was presumably operating fails to account for the structural factors which crucially impinge on the ability of members of oppressed social groups to actually exercise such rights without disciplinary consequences. As argued by Jonsson, her response was informed by the ignorant intellectual position that everyone is equally listened to when they express their views, without recognition that race and other identity markers of the speaker significantly impact how they are heard.

The difference in how my friend and I will be received by the same audience is a theme of conversation which had been and continues to be present throughout our friendship. It often comes up in conversation, such as when we had a light-hearted conversation about the dramatic differences in our diet. To illustrate, for breakfast, for instance, I would often opt for sausage, eggs, pancakes and fried rice. She, on the other hand would typically settle for an apple and some water. One morning, while poking fun at this presumably cultural and apparently inconsequential difference, she made a comment about the ways in which our respective diets were responsible for our body types. For her - slender, lean and petite with me - curvy, voluptuous and “shaped like a Coca-Cola bottle.” That comment led us into important conversation about beauty standards, during which she remarked that I probably had a relatively easier time attracting men sexually. Her remark didn’t offend me, as such. It did make me feel uncomfortable. I had to understand where my discomfort was coming from. Did I think she was right? The remarkable research by Akeia A.F Benard, *Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism*, captures the intellectual discomfort I experienced in that moment and, by extension, the ways in which that remark inspired an additional layer of analysis into my race and gender identity. Upon further inspection, my friend’s remark is an allusion to the characterization of Black women’s bodies as animalistic and hypersexual, in the same way that Sarah Baartman was used as the synonym for the quintessential Black female erotic Body (Bernard, 2). By remarking that it was probably easier for me to attract men sexually, in that moment, she unintentionally yet significantly reduced my romantic capacity to a sexual function. She reduced me to my physiology and played into the traumatic legacy of the colonial hyper-sexualization of Black women - a social legacy which still strongly lingers. Most importantly, she unknowingly drew a contrast, one which Bernard describes as the “who to bed and who to wed” complex (Bernard, 2). That is, her remark negated the fact that my (Black) body is not inherently and fundamentally more sexual than hers. In the same way, if a Black female body is to attract sexual attention, what kind of attention is a white female body to attract?

The “who to bed and to wed” complex remains fundamental in the construction of the colonial project and the profitable exploitation of the Black female body (Benard,3). This

included of course, the sexual exploitation of women of color through rape and systems of concubinage (Bernard, 2). Currently, the sexual exploitation of Black women is visible in politics, popular culture, and media but is typically attached to individual women and presented as a “choice” made by women of color to present themselves in hypersexualized ways (Bernard, 2). In this way, the social creation of the marriageable (White) woman is based in large part on the creation of the animalistic, morally lax, dirty, diseased, poor woman of color (Benard, 2). Both constructions require the colonization of women’s bodies and sexuality—for White and Black women—albeit in different ways.

Moreover, as I grow intellectually, I realize that I am constantly battling two very distinct, dramatically different ways of defining feminism for myself. On the one hand, I feel very represented by the girl bosses in shoulder padded blazers who are trying to speak up in boardrooms. The girl bosses with a college education in hand and access to opportunity. On the other hand, however, I also feel deeply represented by women in rural, remote parts of the world without access to basic healthcare, sanitation or education. Statistically, I was more likely to be one of those girls. I carry the struggles of the women I represent immediately with me all the time. More often than not, the two, very distinct kinds of feminism which require me to wear both capes, feel like they are in battle. Significantly and more specifically, they seem to center different concerns. Let me explain. A story I always revert to it the first time I walked into the (huge) library at UWC. I immediately reached for Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. In a context where all your immediate needs for human survival are met and more, you begin to have access to the kind of existential freedom which allows you to breathe a little easier. For me, breathing easier meant having the kinds of feminist concerns which are only accessible to the lucky African women who get to self-actualize. Specifically, the kind of feminism which encouraged me to simply speak louder etc. to succeed in the world began to make sense to me. I went from being primarily concerned about access to sanitary products, gender based violence/domestic abuse to reading countless books such as *Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office*, *Feminist Fight Club*, *#GirlBoss*, *How to Own The Room*, *A Good Time to be A Girl*, among many others. All of these books had one thing in common: they all insisted that women simply being more socially aggressive, speaking

louder, standing taller or refusing to be interrupted while speaking were/are significant contributions to achieving the world which feminism aims to achieve. As time went on, I had found that I was increasingly consumed by a brand of feminism which felt different from what I had originally grown up with. I grew up surrounded by African women who taught me about African feminist principles from as early as I can remember.

However, the *Lean In* feminism I was beginning to wear felt... ill-fitting. I had later come to realize that I wasn't entirely insane for feeling like the two types of feminism were (fundamentally and significantly) different. Eventually, I was able to understand why I felt guilty whenever I was upset by what would – at home – seem like just another inconvenience of being a woman. For instance, while my feminist acts in a “first world” context took on communicating seemingly minor things like my contempt for mansplaining, women at home had more objectively pressing concerns. While I was getting worked up over being hyper-masculinized by sexist classmates, women at home were literally dying at the hands of their partners, fathers, uncles and strangers on the street. It was difficult for me to reconcile my different kinds of feminist concerns. Until this day, I struggle to maintain the conviction that my struggles, even as a first-world educated (and by extension privileged) black woman, are valid as I acknowledge the gravity of the struggles faced by sub-Saharan African women who don't have the diaspora as an escape.

It's important to clarify and/or clearly understand the important contrast between African feminism and Western feminism respectively. Specifically, where Western feminism fights for the individualistic agency of women to exist in ways which they fashion independently and free of collective gender perceptions, African feminism recognizes women as legitimate, unique bearers of communities. Importantly, African feminism celebrates femininity by defining it as strength and power, beauty and serenity, leadership and followership. Generally, we can infer that African feminism celebrates the maternity of women, characterizing said maternity as a sacred and important part of women, whereas Western feminism typically advocates for the existence and legitimate regard of women as autonomous agents who matter equally whether or not they choose to tap into an assumed, inherent sense of “maternity.” Western feminism rejects the maternalization

of women and, by extension, their regard as reproductive units perceived as a means to an end of community as opposed to being ends in, of and for themselves.

While there are clear definitional differences between the two different kinds of feminism, that's not the only issue. A more pressing problem is the characterizational, fundamental nature of the immediate problems plaguing African women and Western women respectively.

In my continental home, women are fighting material, life or death problems such as gender based violence, femicide, female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, mass rape and child marriage... to name a few. We're fighting to stay alive. The struggles of African women are generally presented by cultural norms which explicitly and deeply disregard, and by extension violate, the agency and autonomy of women. For us, at home, the disregard is explicit and life-threatening. In a Western context, my feminism felt ... "glittery," for lack of a better word. It felt relatively fun to exercise because my life wasn't on the line. This distinction is not to suggest that the collective issues faced by white, Western privileged women are not valid and/or significant, but to draw attention to the fact that women in different cultural contexts face different sets of challenges and to different intensities. A such, one consistent contemporary social symbol like Sheryl Sandberg (wealthy, white, college-educated) will not appeal to women in deeply impoverished areas. That means that for many African women, Tererai Trent, Zimbabwean child bride turned world-renowned speaker, is a more culturally accurate role model than Helena Morrissey, British financier could ever be. That premise is important in collectively defining representation within the feminist movement as a whole.

Importantly, I've come to learn that there is a valid cultural and intellectual difference between Western feminism and African feminism. Karen Wilkes argues that, generally, contemporary representations of feminism have expanded to include affluent women who fit the narrative of "having it all (Wilkes, 19)." Further, she argues that these popular post-feminist depictions center aesthetics ,economic privilege, whiteness, heterosexuality, conventional Western beauty ideals and individualism (Wilkes, 19). To substantiate the danger of singular, one- dimensional representation within feminism, Wilkes highlights

that some in the feminist movement emphasized women's entry into paid employment, secured and secured high-paying jobs only to detach themselves from the movement once they had "gained access to class power with their male counterparts (Wilkes, 19)." Herewith, we can infer that Wilkes is making the valid argument that well-educated, privileged, typically white women who epitomize the neo-liberalist image of an independent woman with initial bargaining power, are unable to truly represent the narratives of most women. That is, their disconnect from the more common narrative of the majority of women arguably renders them incapable of being effective negotiators at the table of power, or even of being them incapable of being effective negotiators at the table of power, or even of being somewhat accurate representatives of feminist success stories. Significantly, Wilkes explores the depictions of affluent women as proactive partakers in an economic landscape driven by consumption. Herewith, we can deduce the ideological harm of depicting financially liberated white women as consistent examples of feminist success stories. That is, while it's really cool that Karen can now afford her own Mercedes Benz GL63 Coupe, our focus should be on Mee Netumbo, an African social symbol of women operating in informal economies and selling roadside fruit and vegetables to feed their families. See what I mean? Furthermore, Wilkes makes the argument that private-school educated, middle-upper-class white women operate from an unequal starting point, enabled by social, economic and cultural capital (Wilkes, 25). Equally important, she posits that the color of their skin grants white women access to the table of power, whereas black and/or African women have to navigate systemic marginalization and erasure without that privilege (Wilkes, 25) This insight highlights the crux of Wilkes' argument: well-educated women with cultural bargaining power conform to patriarchal confines in order to maintain their seats at the table. The manifestations of that conformation take on different forms; for example, teaching heterosexual mothers how to "have it all" instead of urging heterosexual cis-men to be more present fathers, or teaching women to be less feminine, less empathetic instead of teaching men to be more empathetic. The compromises made in the negotiation justify the creation of a more focused type of feminism, which effectively radicalizes the meaningful social, political and economic representation of women. Bádéjọ states that "African womanhood was marginalized by denying the African male the power to protect women's custodial rights

(Bádéjò, 101)” before adding that African feminism cannot be meaningfully sustained without the solidification of African manhood to ensure its fulfillment and longevity. While, intuitively, this sentiment by Bádéjò sounds appealing, I have to question the validity of men’s monopoly on the oversight of the rights of women. Defining men as the sole overseers of women’s rights still relinquishes the power of women to men, further reinforcing the inaccurate cultural perception that women are incapable of meaningful self-governance. Moreover, Bádéjò highlights that African foremothers lived in contexts which stressed their roles as political and religious rulers, healers and military personnel, wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends (Bádéjò, 100). Interestingly, all these roles are underscored by servitude. The perception of African women primarily as servants to their communities underpins African feminism in placing the community above all other entities. As such, the conceptualization of African women as servants legitimates their generally romanticized feminine powers to protect their communities (Bádéjò, 100). Against this backdrop, we have to extensively question the validity of collective perceptions of African women as being in service to their communities before anything else. In what I would regard a failed attempt to underscore the value of African women, W.E.B Du Bois writes the following: *“we have still our poverty and degradation... but we have, too, a vast group of women of Negro blood who is easily the peer of any group of women in the civilized world and for their hard past, I honor the women of my race. Their beauty, their dark and mysterious beauty of midnight eyes, crumpled hair, and soft, full featured faces, is perhaps more to me than to you, because I was born to its warm and subtle spell.”* Admittedly, Du Bois probably meant well with this sentiment. However, his thinking is reflective of the dangerous idea that the existence of African women serves as a means to an end, as opposed to an end in itself; that end being relational servitude. That is, Du Bois’ advocacy takes place within the context of his relationality to women. His advocacy takes place on the basis of motherhood; “born to its warm and subtle spell.” It’s worth noting that his advocacy is not largely rooted in the fact that the humanity of women should be regarded simply because women’s rights are human rights. With that said, the bottom line really is that African feminism positions women as liberated in servitude whereas Western feminism suggests that women should strive for individual

liberation above all else. The cultural models from which these feminisms emanate are different and hence, the conceptual difference makes sense. My most pressing questions remain, what do I when both of these feminisms feel like home to me? When I see myself represented in both sets of principles? When my ethnicity dilutes my systemic privilege but my education reinforces it? I don't know. I reckon it's a life-long project to figure out even vaguely satisfactory answers to these questions, but I'll keep trying. Diedre L. Bádéjò, in a publication by the Indiana University Press, defines African feminism as a "humanistic feminism (Bádéjò, 94)." Herewith, she believes that African feminist ideology is founded upon values that present gender roles as complementary and consequential in the continued progression of communities (Bádéjò, 94). "African feminism places women at the centre of the social order and upholds men as the guardians of women's custodial rights (Bádéjò, 94)." Furthermore, it demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined, implicitly challenging the Sandberg-flavoured feminism which urges women to be more like men in order to thrive in patriarchal frameworks. Where Western feminism teaches women to exist strategically within the patriarchy, African feminism teaches women to exist in spite of it. African femininity complements African masculinity and, as such, African feminism and European feminism evolve from different cultural histories and a different ethos (Bádéjò, 96). Additionally, Bádéjò argues that African feminism suffers impact from enslavement and colonialism, and as such, is socio-historically different from Western feminism (Bádéjò, 101). That is, ancient African women who were enslaved in the West carried with them their values of community, their belief systems centering motherhood. "As icons, African women symbolize the continuity of life, flowing like the rivers with mutual receptivity and sustenance of humanity through planting and harvesting of the earth (Bádéjò, 100)." "Our foremothers and our sisters were taught how to integrate their femininity and their strength (not abandon it), how to bathe in fine oils, and yet to be ready to draw swords of defense from within themselves when necessary. Our forefathers and brothers were taught how to protect feminine strength so that it could continue on with the task of ensuring human survival (Bádéjò, 100).

Conclusion

Now all of my reactions to, battles with and understandings of my race and gender identity have led me to a crucial point of perpetual, intensely consuming reflections. I am constantly asking what my schooling decisions mean for my social and political identity. Does it matter at all that I go to a predominantly white institution? Does it make me less Black? A critical reflection on anything is hard enough. A critical reflection on something which seems to be such a fundamental part of your identity is even harder. My education is and will always be crucially important to me. My education has equalized me and given me what I've always wanted: a chance. Given my political identity, the fairness of that chance will always be debatable. But it's a chance nonetheless and I'll take it. Given the deeply personal importance of my education, you can probably gauge how difficult it is for me to criticize what is supposed to serve as my source of hope and redemption. Learning and living at predominantly white and Western institutions has complicated my understanding of my race and gender identity in ways I didn't think were possible. As I conclude what was supposed to be a piece of work to help me articulate solid answers to complex questions, the questions remain, perhaps more daunting than they were before I began this paper. I ask again, what does it mean for me to learn here? I find that I am more Black than I have ever been, more visible than I have ever been. I refuse to play a representative role, does that mean I've betrayed "the cause" of advancing Black consciousness? Do I have the responsibility to advance because I am Black? Or to, at the very least, exercise the agency to choose when, where and how I'd like to play a representative role? I don't know the answers to all those questions. 30 pages and millions of scribbles later, the only real, honest conclusion I have come to... is that I don't know.