Broken Bridges: An Exchange of Slurs between African Americans and Second Generation Nigerians and the Impact on Identity Formation among the Second Generation

ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of slurs among members of different ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. Studies on inter-group usage of slurs have mostly focused on the use of racial slurs targeting African Americans, the use of racial and ethnic slurs targeting non-black racial/ethnic groups, and the use of sexist slurs targeting people of different gender and sexual orientation. There has been limited analysis of use of slurs between ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. The investigation of the exchange of slurs between the second generation of Nigerian ancestry and African Americans show that slurs are part of the process of identity formation for the second generation. Also, the exchange of slurs between these two ethnic groups within the black category provide more evidence for Croom's (2011, 2013) point that slurs do not always have to be used in a derogatory manner. It adds to what we know about the non-derogatory use of slurs by showing that a slur can be used as a socialization tool for young in-group members. What I show in this article is that slurs can be appropriated by the group using the slur to target out-group members and used within their own group to send a cautionary message to group members based on the derogatory meanings that are infused into the slur.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the use of slurs among members of different ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. Studies on inter-group usage of slurs have mostly focused on the use of racial slurs targeting African Americans, the use of racial and ethnic slurs targeting non-black racial/ethnic groups, and the use of sexist slurs targeting people of different gender and sexual orientation. There has been limited analysis of use of slurs between ethnic groups within the black racial category in the United States. Reasons for this lie in the United States history with black people: A history that runs from slavery, to legal segregation, (Jim Crow), to the civil rights movement for redress of racial injustices, to modern day policies and arrangements such as residential segregation that have kept black people as a non-dominant group and whites as the dominant group. As a result, in many quarters of American society, black people are seen as a monolithic group.

But since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, also known as the Hart Cellar Act, which liberalized U.S. immigration policy and banished national quotas which kept immigration from non- European countries very low, the majority of immigrants to the United States are now non-whites from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, and Africa. Consequently, the United States is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. And following the larger national trend, the black racial category in the United States is becoming more ethnically diverse because of increasing Caribbean and African populations. Between 1990 and 2000, the African

population grew at a rate of 167 percent compared to 66.7 percent for Caribbeans and 16.9 percent for African Americans (Logan and Deane, 2003). As at 2010, foreign born Africans and Caribbeans were 10 percent of the black population in the United States. A strong assumption and/or fear among many immigration scholars is that black immigrants and their children will be racialized to become just black regardless of their ethnicity because of the United States racial context. These scholars argue that ongoing racial prejudice and racial discrimination against black people and the visible black phenotype of these black immigrants and their children ensures that they would not be able to avoid being defined through the prism of race (Alba, 2005; Arthur, 2008; Manning, 2009; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Vickerman, 1999, 2007; Waters, 1999). This is a legitimate concern, but I argue that even within the racial context of the United States, which is in a state of flux largely because of immigration, ethnics within the black category are erecting boundaries between themselves and forming and maintaining ethnic identities distinct from that of African Americans.

In this article, I focus on a crucial aspect of inter-ethnic group relations among groups within the black racial category that set the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry on the path of constructing and maintaining ethnic identities distinct from African Americans.[1] This crucial aspect of their group relations is the exchange of slurs between African Americans and Africans. On the whole, relations between the two groups when they were young were fraught. The exchange of slurs was one dimension of these fraught relations. The examination of the exchange of slurs by these two groups provides some crucial insight into how ethnic diversity within the black category is playing out on the ground. This examination also reveals several medium and long term consequences of the usage of slurs on the ethnic identities formed by the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry. As a result, this article makes a key contribution

to existing literature on slurs by showing how slurs can become a critical part of the identity formation process.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, I discuss the studies which provide the theoretical framework for the analysis. The first sub-section defines what slurs are. The second reviews several studies which show that young children understand race and use racial distinctions to create social hierarchies. I review this literature to establish the fact that the exchange of slurs by children can have long lasting consequences. The third discusses the three identity theories I use to guide the analysis of why the use of slurs among these groups influenced the ethnic identity formation process of the second generation of Nigerian/African descent. They were chosen because they stress that identity is inherently relational.

2.1   What is a Slur?

Slurs usually derogate, ridicule, or demean members of a certain class by targeting certain properties or features associated with those members as a class (Croom, 2011, p. 353). According to Croom (2011), "when a speaker uses a slur "the speaker intends to express (i) their endorsement of a (usually *negative) attitude* (ii) towards the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of their utterance (2011, p. 353)." An ethnic slur is defined as any unfavorable, derisive or disparaging jokes, name callings, anecdotes, sayings, rhymes, riddles, etc. directed against an ethnic group (Dundes, 1965, p. 43; Garcia, 1976).   Croom (2011, 2013) argues that a better way of understanding the literal meaning of a slur is to think of it in terms of a family resemblance conception of category membership where a list of properties are attached or seen as attached to

the slur. I utilize Croom's family resemblance model to explicate the meanings of the slurs used by both groups.

The purpose of using a slur is to increase the difference in asymmetrical power relations among the interlocutors in the specific conversational context or among the groups to which they belong more generally (Croom 2011, 2013). Consequently, the derogative use of slurs can be extremely destructive to the actual character of an individual that it attacks (Croom, 2011). I find this analysis of slurs very insightful because it helps explain the interaction dynamics between African Americans and Africans as they exchanged slurs.

However, slurs are not always or exclusively derogatory (Croom, 2011, 2013). They can be frequently appropriated by the very in-group members that the slur was originally intended to target often as a way to strengthen in-group solidarity (Croom, 2011, p. 177). In this article, I discuss how the slur which targeted African Americans was also used by Africans as a vehicle to communicate an ethnic message to members of the in-group.

2.2. Racial Socialization and Awareness of Race Among Children

A field of social psychology research has studied the age at which young children become aware of race in their national context (Akilah Dulin-Keita et al. 2011; Connolly, 2002; Williams, Boswell and Best, 1975; Williams and Roberson, 1967). These studies have found that children acquire an understanding of race and racial identity at a very early age. White children as young as six were aware of their racial identity, were more likely to assign positive feature to whites, and by adolescence, white boys were most likely to express racial prejudice against black people (Boocock and Scott, 2005). Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) found that preschool children used racist language to produce harmful results, to evoke emotional reactions from victims, and to re-

create social hierarchies. Other studies have found that children self- separate by race (Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001; Connolly, 2002). They use race to establish dominance, maintain control, and reinforce segregation.

These studies all focused on the divide between black and white children. Dulin-Keita et al (2011) added Hispanic children into the group of children to be studied in order to extend what is known about awareness of race among marginalized groups. They found that non-Hispanic black children were more aware of the concept of race. Hispanic children's awareness of the definition of race was nearly identical to that of non-Hispanic white children.

What these studies tell us is that children from a very young age understand the production of race in American society and use it to establish social hierarchies, provoke emotional distress, and ostracize children they feel belong to the out-group based on their race. In this article, I add to this area of research by showing that black children make further intra-racial distinctions among themselves based on ethnic difference, and one way they do this is by using ethnic slurs.

2.3. Theories of Identity Formation

The analyses in this article focus not only on the description of the slurs used but also on the consequences of the slur exchange on the identity formation process of the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry. The theories of Richard Jenkins (2008), Fredrik Barth (1969), and David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters (1992) guide my analyses.

Richard Jenkin's (2008) defines social identity, of which ethnic identity is a type, as "the human capacity—as rooted in language—to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what')." He argues that "knowing who's who involves processes of classification and signification that necessarily invoke criteria of similarity and difference" and that "identity works first and foremost

because it has capacity to exclude" (Jenkins, 2008 p.5, 23). This point by Jenkins (2008) informs the analysis of the objective behind the usage of the slur by both groups—African Americans and the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry.

The other theorist of identity whose work I use as part of the theoretical framework is Fredrik Barth. He argues that ethnic identity is constructed via social interaction at and across ethnic boundaries and therefore the interactions should be the primary focus of identity studies. He advices researchers to turn their analytical focus "to processes of ethnic boundary maintenance and group recruitment" which demands an investigative focus on "inter-ethnic (inter-group) relations (Barth, 1969, p. 14)." The analysis of the slur exchange between African Americans and the second generation of Nigerian ancestry is an example of interactions between groups that is occurring at the ethnic boundaries and thus forming ethnic identity.

Both Jenkins (2008) and Barth (1969) place special attention on the boundaries that exist between groups. Signaling difference between ethnic groups while simultaneously emphasizing similarity among members of a group is the way ethnic identity is constructed. And as we shall see in the findings section, this is an extremely important reason why the exchange of slurs between the two ethnic groups within the black category was consequential.

I use the theory by Mittelberg and Waters (1992) to guide my analysis of why the fraught relations between the second generation of Nigerian ancestry and their African American peers was so impactful. Mittelberg and Waters (1992) in their Migrant ethnogenesis (the proximal host model) identify three social actors that shape identity formation for immigrants. The first actor is the individual immigrant who uses elements and his own cognitive map to determine his or her own identity and attaches a positive or negative valence to that identity. The second actor is society at large who uses elements (be it race, religion, etc.) to determine the immigrant's identity as well

as to attach a positive or negative valence to that identity. The third actor is the collection of people called the proximal host—the group that wider society defines as the immigrant's co-ethnics. The proximal host is also defined as the group people in the receiving country assign the new immigrant into (Mittelberg and Waters, 1992, p. 416). So, for the second generation of Nigerian/African ancestry who are racially black, their proximal host is African-Americans.

The aspect of their theory which guide the analysis of how slurs become an important part of the identity formation process is their point that the identity formed by the new immigrants is dependent on the response of the proximal hosts to these new migrants who have been defined as similar to them and assigned into their ethnic category by the larger society of the receiving country. Some notable studies have found evidence that first generation black immigrants distance themselves from African-Americans because they feel that assimilating into the African American community is downward mobility (Waters, 1999; Vickerman, 1999; Mittelberg and Waters, 1992). Studies on second generation Caribbeans in the United States find that some of them assimilate to become African-American, others retain their parents ethnic identities, while others simultaneously hold a black and ethnic identity (Kasinitz et al., 2008; Richards, 2008; Warikoo, 2004, 2005; Butterfield, 2004; Waters, 1999).

However, none of these studies have done a detailed investigation of the responses of proximal hosts to the second generation or detailed the forms these responses take. My examination of inter-ethnic group relations between the second generation and African Americans is what revealed the exchange of slurs between members of the two groups. I have not found other studies that have researched this question for the African second generation in the United States and this is a gap in the literature that this article begins to fill.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The analyses that follow use data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 75 adult respondents between 22 and 58 years of age. All respondents were second-generation immigrants of Nigerian ancestry. I chose to focus on this group because Nigerians are the largest national group from Africa in the United States. In 1980, Nigerians were 37 percent of all black African immigrants in the United States, and by 2010 they were still 19 percent of all black African immigrants—a significant proportion because sub-Saharan (black) Africa is made up of forty-eight countries. This is the key reason the Nigerian second generation is the largest second-generation black African national group in the United States (Capps et al., 2011). As a result, the African story in the United States is largely a Nigerian story.

The sample was collected in two ways. First, respondents were sampled from visitors to the Nigerian Embassy in New York. A screening questionnaire was used to identify individuals who met the sampling criteria—second generation and over the age of twenty-two—and who were willing to be interviewed. Such respondents were followed up and interviewed. There were three main types of visitors to the embassy: those engaged in frequent transnational activities; those who had never visited Nigeria or were infrequent visitors but needed to go because of a critical event in the life cycle, such as a death or wedding in the family; and those who had no business in the embassy or in Nigeria but were escorting members of their social networks. With this mix of visitors, a good representation of the second generation was obtained.

Second, after the embassy as a site was exhausted, snowball sampling was used. The two points of entry were churches and Nigerian organizations. Key informants referred me to others in their organizations and social networks. I took care not to oversample from any one social network.

The interviews were conducted from January to November 2009. The interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to two hours and nine minutes in length. The average length was an hour. Twenty of the interviews were face-to-face and forty-seven were by telephone. Sixty-one percent (N=46) of respondents were female and 39 percent (N=29) were male. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically with Atlas.ti.

The data analyzed for this article was drawn from questions asking respondents to describe their experiences in their schools and neighborhoods. They were asked whether they fit in, or felt that they were treated differently. They were asked to describe their interactions with African Americans from childhood to adulthood. I asked these questions because understanding their inter-ethnic group relations with African Americans will increase our understanding of the identity formation process of the second generation. I wanted to understand how they formed their ethnic identities in the shadow of a larger black group. Also, I had a hunch that the response of the proximal host during childhood to early adulthood would contribute significantly to the sense of 'self' and subjectivities and influence the ethnic identities the second generation now hold as adults.

All names used are pseudonyms. For respondents who had ethnic names, I gave them pseudonyms drawn from their particular ethnic group. For example, a respondent with a Yoruba name is given a Yoruba pseudonym. Those with English names are given English pseudonyms.

4. FINDINGS
This section begins with the negative image African Americans had of Africans as came to light in the ethnic slur used. In kindergarten to twelfth grade, African Americans frequently called Africans "*African Booty Scratcher.*" In the sub-section below, I discuss what this slur means and

impact its usage had on the second generation of Nigerian ancestry. In the next sub-section, I present the ethnic slur the second generation directed at African Americans.

4.1. The Ethnic Slur used by African Americans against Africans: African Booty Scratcher

Every respondent said they had experienced discrimination from African Americans. The region or state they grew up in did not make a difference. Nor did the neighborhoods they grew up in, or whether they attended public or private schools. Fraught relations largely took the form of being on the receiving end of teasing, ridicule, and social ostracism.

The most common slur against them by their African American peers was *"African Booty Scratcher."* If used by a non-black person this slur would be a racial slur that deprecates a person based on their physical characteristics. But when used by African Americans, fellow members of the black race, against Africans, it becomes both a racial and ethnic slur. African Americans used this slur to designate Africans (those with very recent ties to Africa) as a lesser type of black.

The slur was used to draw a boundary between African Americans and young Africans. According to respondents, African Americans called them *African booty scratcher* because African Americans saw themselves as more civilized and superior to Africans. Respondents believed that African Americans felt that the centuries they had spent in the United States, even if a significant portion of that time had been spent as slaves, had had a civilizing influence. In contrast, Africans living in Africa and Africans who had recently arrived from the African continent were coming from bushes and were closer to primates than human beings. A large part of these views were drawn from the mass media's portrayal of Africa and its people—that Africa was an uncivilized jungle full of savages. And this seeped into one of their frequent comments to

the African second generation: "go back to your jungle."An African booty scratcher was a foreign black; a black who was definitely not their (African American) kind of black.

Collating the meanings of African Booty Scratcher from respondents, and using Croom's (2011, 2013) family resemblance model, the network properties of *African booty scratcher* are the following;

Slur: African Booty Scratcher

P1.   X is African

P2.   X is too dark complexioned, is black as night

P3.   X is an uncivilized person from the African jungle

P4.   X is an ugly person with thick and coarse features, a non-aquiline (flat and broad) nose,
       and thick lips

P5.   X is a person who has a bad odor/who smells

P6.   X is not black like us (African Americans)

P7.   X is a different kind of black

Some might be tempted to dismiss teasing as part of the normal scene of growing up, but for the African second generation this teasing had more deleterious meanings—it marked them as different, as less. It also had several medium and long-term consequences. This finding is contrary to what existing research on the effects of name-calling on the second generation tells us. A large scale study of second generation adults of different racial and ethnic groups in New York found that many of them had been targets of ethnic and racial slurs when growing up. Russian Jews were called "bagels" and "kikes" and "commie" for communist. The Chinese were called "Chinks" or

"slant eyes" or "Bruce Lee." African Americans and West Indians were referred to with racial slurs such as "nigger." But these authors viewed these name-calling incidents as impersonal encounters that though "hurtful were not overly dramatic" and did not have lasting consequences (Kasinitz et al., 2008).

But being called *African booty scratcher* by African Americans, as part of the tense relations between the two groups, had immediate and lasting consequences for the second generation of Nigerian ancestry. Starting with the immediate consequences, one was that it injured respondents' self-esteem and caused many to have ambiguous ethnic identities. An example is Seun, a thirty-two-year-old retail manager. He came to the United States when he was a year old. He recalls that the tense relations he had with African Americans which included them calling him *African booty scratcher,* making fun of his name, and socially ostracizing him made him become really confused about his identity. He tried many times to figure out exactly where he fit in. There were very few black immigrants, either African or Caribbean, in his school in the 1980s, and so he did not have a "natural support group." He knew that he wasn't exactly like black Americans, but he was somewhat like them because of his black skin. His and other respondents ambiguous identities became more concrete and more Nigerian centric upon getting to college where they met many more Nigerians and Africans.

Being a target of the ethnic slur *African booty scratcher* has had several long lasting consequences. Temitayo, a twenty-eight-year-old medical doctor who came to the United States when she was two, told me that "many of us have horror stories as children—the whole experience of being called *African booty scratcher.* We were not beaten or hit, but these are emotional words—and words do break your bones. They always say only stick and stones hurt, but words do hurt. They hurt more than violence sometimes." I found evidence of this cost carrying over into

adulthood. Temitayo shared the experiences of one of her Nigerian friends who, she says, "told me 'I cannot stand that I was called *African booty scratcher*, and because of that there is no way I can be friends with these people. They don't like me. They don't want me to be their friend. Why would they call me something like that?' And she is a grown woman telling me this. This was in college, and she still holds on to those hurts."

An outgrowth of the tense relations is the social distance that exists between many of the second generation and African Americans as adults. Kemi, a twenty-seven-year-old lawyer, agrees that these fraught relations have influenced her relations with African Americans now that she is an adult. She says, "I still have that mentality that I don't understand African Americans. They comment that 'I don't like any of you [Africans]. 'You are mean to us.' And I have to explain to them that here is the deal, when some of us came here when we were younger you teased us in school." And "even till today, I do not have a lot of African American friends."

Tense relations between the African second generation and members of their proximal hosts in both countries has made many of them unfamiliar with each other. Linda, a twenty-four-year-old nurse in the United States, notes that her African American peers viewed her as the stereotypical African—a person who is "black as night," who has "an odor," and who does not "speak English well"—and "kind of ostracized me." For this reason, she says, "they did not really understand my culture, and in a way I did not understand their culture, and so that is where the bridge was broken when I was growing up." The one good African stereotype was that "Africans were smart." Most of the second generation grew up hanging out with people from other ethnic and racial groups who were friendlier.

The general response of African Americans towards the second generation of Nigerian ancestry was surprising to the second generation, who felt that they were all similar as they all

came from Africa, even if they had left Africa at different times.[2] Respondents said they believed that African Americans felt that the centuries they had spent in the United States, even if a significant portion of that time had been spent as slaves, had had a civilizing influence. And that in contrast, Africans living in Africa and who had recently arrived from Africa were coming from bushes and were closer to primates than human beings. A large part of these views were drawn from the mass media's portrayal of Africa and its people—that Africa was an uncivilized jungle full of savages. And this seeped into one of their frequent comments to the African second generation: "go back to your jungle."

This view of Africans has changed significantly since the turn of the twenty-first century. Now, most of the second generation concede that the reputation of most Africans, and especially Nigerians, has improved in the United States.[3] One reason is their increasing numerical strength. More of them are now living the United States, and it is far more rare for an African and his or her siblings to be the only Africans in their school. Another factor they cite is the increasing African cultural presence in the United States. There are now numerous African restaurants and shops in many American cities. As Funke, a medical doctor living in Texas, says, "Back in the day, you had to go to the Indian or Hispanic food store to buy African food. Now you can go to an African food store. There are tons of them. Before, if I wanted to buy lace, I would have to beg an aunt in Nigeria to please buy and send me 10 yards of lace. Now I just go to a lace store or I go to a head tie store. There are just so many Africans around that they make living in America as an African very easy; just like how the Hispanics live in America because there are so many of them."

4.2. The Ethnic Slur used by Africans against African Americans: Akata

Even as African Americans called young Africans *African booty scratcher,* the second generation of Nigerian ancestry also used a slur against African Americans. The most popular slur used by members of the Nigerian community, both first and second generation, was *"Akata."* The word has its origin in the Yoruba language and loosely translated means a wild cat or a wandering cat without a home. Farooq Kperogi (2013) states that *Akata* encapsulates the impressions that registered in the minds of the first Yoruba immigrants to America about African Americans: that they are wild, rude, impetuous, aggressive, and uncultured. A less popular slur directed at African Americans by members of the Nigerian community was *"Ajereke"* which literally means one who eats sugarcane. This slur was referencing the slave history of African Americans while making it clear that Nigerians did not share this slave history. But, in this article, I focus only on the more widely used slur of *Akata*.

Using the family resemblance model (Croom, 2011, 2013), the meanings of the ethnic slur *"Akata"* are the following:

Slur is Akata

P1.   X is a black person (African American) without roots – cannot point to the exact village and country where his/her ancestors are from.

P2.   X is someone that has no culture or a deficient culture.

P3.   X is an African American (descended from enslaved Africans on U.S. soil).

P4.   X is someone with poor home training.

P5.   X is a foreigner.[4]

The slur *Akata* was used to draw ethnic boundaries between Nigerians and African Americans. Boundaries are used to create an us-versus-them divide. Scholars who study boundaries, such as Michelle Lamont, divide boundaries into two types: social boundaries, which are objectified differences like class and race, and symbolic boundaries, which Lamont (1992) defines as "the types of lines that individuals draw when they categorize people...They are evaluative distinctions—different ways of believing that "we" are better than "them." Lamont identifies three main types of symbolic boundaries: moral, socioeconomic, and cultural:

> Moral boundaries are drawn on the basis of moral character. They are centered around such qualities as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, and consideration for others. Socioeconomic boundaries are drawn on the basis of judgments concerning people's social position as indicated by their wealth, power, or professional success. Cultural boundaries are drawn of the basis of education, intelligence, manners, tastes, and command of high culture (Lamont, 1992, p., 4).

The slur was used by Nigerians to draw moral and cultural boundaries between themselves and African Americans. As Croom (2011) notes, the objective of using a slur is to express an endorsement of a usually negative attitude towards the *descriptive properties* possessed by the target of the speaker's utterance. The slur endorsed the view that African Americans have no roots, don't prioritize education as highly as Nigerians do, lack respect for their elders, and are welfare dependent and lazy.

The negative stereotypes they used to describe African Americans are largely drawn from the media's portrayal of African Americans. There are many African Americans who are successful and middle and upper class. There are many who disconfirm the negative stereotypes encapsulated in the slur *Akata*. But, as social psychology studies have found, while bad behavior for members of the in-group (here, Nigerians) is attributed to situational or environmental factors and seen as the exception, the same bad behavior among members of the out-group (here, African Americans) is attributed to disposition and deep character flaws. As a result of these psychological

decisions about the behaviors of individuals and groups, people are able to maintain stereotypes, both good and bad, in the face of disconfirming evidence. With this in-group/out-group divide, members of the in-group are able to dismiss evidence that disconfirms their negative stereotypes concerning the out-group as exceptions to the norm. In this way, disconfirming evidence does not upturn the negative stereotypes (Waters, 1999).

4.2.1   The use of the slur Akata within the Nigerian Diasporic community

The slur *Akata* was also used by in-group members (Nigerians) to stress what the second generation should not become. When used within the group, it was a term infused with multiple cultural messages. According to Kemi, being told not to become *Akata* means:

> You respect your elders, you go to school, you do what you have to do. We have boundaries where some of my American friends don't. Some of them can talk anyhow to their parents. At the same token, some of them don't. So, I don't like to stereotype everybody but more of my friends, more than those who do not, act in that stereotypical American way. I was always taught that that is not right. We don't act like that, we are much more… our culture doesn't show us that or things like that. Not that we are elevated to a different level but we just have a code of conduct that we kind of go by.

Kemi's parents raised her with a "Naija" [Nigerian] mentality, which she says is "more of an action thing than stuff that I can put it into words." Her parents, family, and friends used pejoratives such as *Ajereke,* and the aforementioned *Akata* to drive home a key message: Don't become a foreigner. Don't become unfamiliar with our culture and values. Don't eschew education. Don't become disaffected with schooling but rather stay focused and do well. Now that the second generation are adults, the cultural and moral boundaries the slur *Akata* helped erect still influence the different ways the second generation of Nigerian ancestry believe they are ethnically distinct from African Americans.

Nigerians and Africans in the U.S. diaspora held a lot of negative stereotypes of African Americans. Most parents believed very strongly in these negative African American stereotypes, and they told their children not to befriend and hang out with their African American peers. Many of the second generation were dissuaded from hanging out with peers from the proximal host. They did not want them to turn out as *Akatas,* which according to Ike meant:

> As far as education, they don't go as far as the education might go. The women, sometimes they have teen pregnancies. Maybe they smoke weed; they hang out; they do things that I guess a regular person shouldn't do, what someone that has good home training wouldn't do. They are out late at night instead of being in their houses. Instead of being at home with their families. Things like that.

According to Uju, a twenty-two-year-old female, "Nigerians can be racist. They think every African American is doing bad. They would rather you hang out with whites and not African Americans because they feel that whites are more quiet and are less likely to get into trouble."

Parents who did not issue a blanket command not to hang out with African Americans specified the African Americans they did not want their children to hang out with. Lola's parents "Only dissuaded me from hanging out with African American women who were pregnant. My mum entertained the stereotypes like 'their women don't respect their elders, they don't take education seriously, they have sex and have babies, and I don't want you to be like that.'" According to Ehi, "my parents never wanted us to hang out with those from the hood." Some respondents were unhappy with what they felt was a very discriminatory view. They often ignored their parents' strictures but knew that if their behavior changed significantly, such that they were becoming *Akatas,* their parents would come down hard on them. Parents' messages—warning their children not to hang out with members of their proximal hosts and encouraging them to hang out with children from stable homes with two parents, and children who were not involved in criminal or promiscuous activities—are similar to the messages elite and stable middle class African

Americans gave their children (Lacy, 2007; Patillo-McCoy, 1999). Those parents also worried that their children would, through friendships, pick up bad habits from lower-class blacks (Lacy, 2007).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has shown how ethnic slurs become part of the identity formation process. Since identity is formed via interaction with other groups in society, for the second generation of Nigerian ancestry, being called an ethnic slur by African Americans forced them to come up with their own definition of what it means to be black in the United States. Even thought the view of Africans and Nigerians in particular has improved in the United States since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the second generation's tense relations with their proximal hosts, African Americans, when they were young has had lasting impact on how they ethnically identify.

From the exchange of slurs between these two ethnic groups within the black category we see that as Croom (2011, 2013) notes slurs do not always have to be used in a derogatory manner. The example he gives of this is slurs being appropriated by members of the group targeted by the slur and used to improve group solidarity. What I show in this article is that slurs can be appropriated by the group using the slur to target out-group members and used within their own group to send a cautionary message to group members based on the derogatory meanings that are infused into the slur. This is a contribution to existing literature on slurs. The slur *Akata* communicated multiple cultural messages to young members in the in-group. In this way, the slur *Akata* became a tool of socialization. And it became a tool of socialization because of the ethnoracial context of the United States. Race relations in the United States has placed black people at or near the bottom of its ethnoracial hierarchy (Bashi-Treitler, 2013; Omi and Winant, 1994; Steinberg, 1989). As a result of this history, many scholars view black people as an undifferentiated

mass, though this notion of a monolithic blackness is being chipped away as more and more black immigrants and their children from Africa and the Caribbean settle in the United States. Studies like this one are increasing our knowledge of how this ethnic diversity and battle for positioning within the black category is playing out on the ground.

As this article has demonstrated, despite a widespread view that black immigrants and their children will be racialized to just black without regard for their ethnicity or that in the competition between their racial and ethnic identities, race will overwhelm their ethnicity (Alba, 2005; Manning, 2009; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Tuan, 1998; Vickerman, 2007; Waters, 1999) because of ongoing racial prejudice and discrimination against black people, members of these groups, even when they were young, were erecting boundaries that delineated difference. African Americans drew their boundaries based largely on physical difference and foreignness, while the second generation and members of their communities drew boundaries against African Americans largely on cultural and moral differences. The boundaries drawn were influenced by the negative stereotypes of African Americans (U.S. native blacks) that are widely disseminated in the public sphere. Many of the first generation had heard these negative stereotypes even before coming to the United States. They saw them repeated in the mass media in the United States and had had bad experiences with African Americans which only confirmed their negative impressions (Waters 1999). These parents in turn warned their children to deal with African Americans from a distance.

As a result of their parents influence, and their own experiences with African Americans, the second generation of Nigerian ancestry along with many other second generation blacks are increasingly holding distinct ethnic identities that differentiate them from African Americans (Awokoya, 2012; Balogun, 2011; Butterfield, 2004; Ette, 2012; Humphries, 2009; Kibona-Clark, 2009; Richards, 2008; Vickerman, 1999; Waters, 1999; Yeboah, 2008). This ability of the black

second generation to maintain their ethnic difference within the U.S.'s ethnoracial context suggests that as the U.S. ethnoracial system changes largely as a result of immigration and rising multiracialism (Hochschild, Weaver, and Burch, 2012; Lee and Bean, 2010), the shift is opening up space for new definitions of blackness in the United States.

NOTES

[1] I define the second generation as individuals who were born in the United States of at least one foreign-born Nigerian parent or who came to the United States at or before the age of twelve. Also, I sometimes extend to the discussion to cover Africans or the African second generation for two reasons. First, Nigerians are part of the larger African group. Second, most respondents included a pan-ethnic African identity in their slate of identities. They used the term *African* to refer to themselves, their parents, and individuals from other sub-Saharan African countries. They also used the term to delineate an ethnic boundary between themselves and African Americans (those descended from enslaved Africans held in the United States) and Afro-Caribbeans.

[2] These groups are seen to be part of the different waves of the African diaspora with contemporary African immigrants being the most recent wave and forming the post-colonial African diaspora (see Zeleza, 2009).

[3] African refugees seem to be the exception, especially if they are African Muslims. The response of British and American natives has been hostile in several cities.

[4] Going back to Nigeria many of the second generation would be called *"Akata"* because in that context they would be foreigners but in America and Britain these terms were used to draw symbolic cultural and moral boundaries against African Americans and British Caribbeans.

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