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Crossing Boundaries to Engage in Difficult Dialogues

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Crossing Boundaries to Engage in Difficult Dialogues

Abstract

We are two African scholars, from Nigeria and Tanzania, who have extensive experience in Canada and the United States. Issues such as race and color, which are so *central to the lives of people in North America do not seem to matter to us as much. This often creates misunderstandings between us as Africans and the people of North America. In the United States, for example, we Africans find ourselves in a situation where there are categories ready made, such as "people of color" and we wonder whether those categories are supposed to apply to us. We wonder whether the people of the United States are aware of our right as Africans to define and categorize ourselves. In a word, we are not people of color. In this session, we question the very premises of the conference theme and discuss our own unique experiences in Canada and the United States.*

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Joseph L. Mbele
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We are two African scholars, from Nigeria and Tanzania, who have extensive experience in Canada and the United States of America respectively. The topic of this conference, "People of Color in Predominantly White Institutions" interests and intrigues us. We know that our situation is peculiar. In looking at the topics suggested for this conference, we think that our presentation fits the topic of "Crossing boundaries to engage in difficult dialogues," since we know that we are bound to question the very premises of the conference theme.

Issues such as race and color, which are so central to the lives of people in North America, do not seem to matter to us as much. This often creates misunderstandings between us Africans and the people of North America. In the U.S.A., for example, we Africans find ourselves in a situation where there are categories ready made, such as "people of color," and we wonder whether those categories are supposed to apply to us. We wonder whether the people of the U.S.A. are aware of our right as Africans to define and categorize ourselves. In a word, we are not people of color.

The fact that the two of us have experienced Canada and the U.S.A. enables us to compare these two countries. Terms and stereotypes are a key consideration. The term people of color is not as common in Canada as it is in the U.S.A.. Other terms are used there: such as minorities or visible minorities. In Canada, when people see a black person, they tend to think that person comes from the Caribbean. If the person speaks English, the assumption is that that person is from Jamaica and if he or she speaks French, he or she is assumed to be from Haiti.

In the U.S.A., people tend to assume that black people are African Americans. If it turns out that the person is not African American but an African, the standard assumption is

that that person is from Nigeria.

In the U.S. institutions of higher learning, stereotypes are common. Black people who teach are assumed to be teaching black studies. Africans are assumed to be teaching African studies. If you are Hispanic, you are assumed to be teaching things Hispanic. There is a sense that your cultural or racial background makes you an expert on that heritage. Black people are expected to teach about black issues and Hispanic people are expected to teach about Hispanic issues and Asian people are expected to teach about Asian issues. A course such as post colonial literature is supposed to be taught by someone from Africa, India, the Caribbean or such other post colonial area.

In Canada, things seem to work differently. It is more common for Canadians to be teaching about Africa. The Africans go to listen to the Canadians talking about Africa. In the U.S.A., non-Africans might be denied the opportunity to teach about Africa, even if they are knowledgeable.

In the U.S.A. there are strong departments and programs of African studies and African American studies. Canada is rather different. Even the Canadian Association of African Studies seems to be a forum for Canadians to present Africa, with the Africans being generally marginalized.

It seems that "people of color" in the U.S.A. have positioned themselves better in terms of being organized and are thus more able to negotiate questions of power than is the case with people of color in Canada. The Africans in Canada are not organized as a group. As a result they have little clout and they end up being at the bottom of the totem pole in matters of social services and so forth.

As parents, we are concerned also with the lives of our children. We think the topic of this conference and the engagement with the issues it raises will help educate us in ways that will benefit our children, who are growing up in North America and are being shaped by the predominantly white institutions. We are interested in how this is affecting their development, their identity and their future.

Presenters

Gertrude Edem, born in Nigeria, was educated in Nigeria, Senegal and Canada. She has a diploma in Education, bachelor and master degrees and is finishing her Ph.D. at the University of McGill, Canada, with a thesis on the theatre of Bernard Dadie. Her teaching has been in all levels of French language, African Literature in French and English, new world Francophone studies, African studies and Women's studies. Her research interests are in Francophone Literature, African studies and comparative women's studies. She has published several papers and presented papers at conferences in Nigeria, Canada and the U.S.A. She has taught in Canadian as well as Nigerian institutions of higher learning and is making a move to the U.S.A. to continue teaching. She has won a number of academic awards.

Born in Tanzania, **Joseph L Mbele** was educated there and at the University of

Wisconsin Madison, where he did his doctorate in African Languages and Literature. He has taught at the University of Dar es Salaam, Burundi, Wisconsin-Madison and now teaches at St. Olaf College. He has given lectures and conference papers at various universities across the world. His teaching is in Literature, Folklore, Literary Theory and Criticism, Post colonial literature. His research is in Folklore, with a special emphasis on folk narratives, epics and tales of heroes, tricksters and villains. He has published many papers and book chapters and also a book "Matengo Folktales." He has won a number of awards and grants.